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THRILLING WESTERN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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NEVER COME BACK
By GIFF CHESHIRE

FEATURING

THE TEXAN
A Novel of the Days When Tombstone Ran Wild
By A. LESLIE

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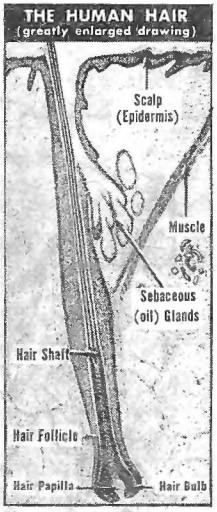

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Symptoms: Considerable loss of hair *following permanent.* Hair came out in handfuls.
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NOVEMBER, 1951
Vol. LXV No. 2

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Always ready for a fight or a frolic, Slone found both in Arizona—plus a girl worth battling for!

A Complete Novelet

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Roark Lowey saw all his work in ashes—and vowed to track down the man who had brought range ruin!

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MORRIS OGDEN JONES, *Editor*

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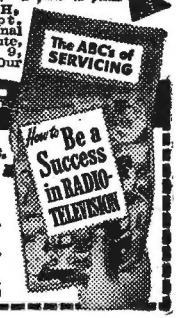

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PIONEER of PIONEERS

The True Story
of
Johann Augustus
Sutter

LOOKING for the first time on the ancient adobe walls of Sutter's Fort, now a California state memorial, makes a tourist wonder about the man who built it, 'way back in 1839.

Johann Augustus Sutter was a colorful character and a man of wealth and power in the early days of the West. It was John Sutter, as he was known in America, who actually bought out Russia in California. The Russian empire owned quite a slice of the richest, most productive land on the Pacific Coast in those days. But Sutter bought her out for the amazingly small sum of $30,000. More of that later.

Probably the most remarkable thing that happened to Sutter was that he was completely ruined by the discovery of gold on his land. He had a fear of gold, believed that to discover the precious metal was bad luck —and in his case his fears were reality, for he died poor, a prosperous landholder ruined by discovery of the yellow dust.

Sutter came to America from his native Switzerland as a young man, leaving a wife and four children behind. He was just a jump ahead of a warrant for his arrest as a debtor, history records. But he had some money when he left Switzerland, and decided to settle in Missouri, then our Western frontier. He acquired a boat, eventually stopped at the Sandwich Islands (Hawaiian Islands), and took aboard a number of Kanakas and their wives as laborers. Later he landed on the California coast at Yerba Buena, which is now the site of San Francisco.

Sutter was a man of forceful personality, and with the ability to make friends in high places. Thus he requested, and was granted, land on the Sacramento River, inland from the coast. He named his holding "New Helvetia," and a little later built his great fort for safety from the many unfriendly Indians nearby.

The words Sutter's Fort, or Fort Sutter, became magic words. People flocked to New Helvetia to find work in the wheat fields of the Swiss-American. He rapidly became very rich in worldly goods, though he spent money like a prince. He sent back to Switzerland for his wife and children and set them up in a palatial home.

At this time, Russia not only owned land and riches north of San Francisco but also held great bases in Alaska. Sitka was the headquarters for the Russian forts of Ross and Bodega in California. For some reason no one understood, the Russian Empire decided to sell out her California holdings—a decision, incidentally, she probably regrets to this day. The Czar's representative offered the land, buildings and other considerations to the Hudson's Bay Company and to the Mexican and Spanish powers in California—for the sum of $30,000!

When these parties delayed their decision, John Sutter stepped in and took over the Russian deal. Sutter was rich in land but not in cash, but being the enterprising man he was, he got the Russians to accept a down-payment of $2,000, the remainder to be paid them in produce every year until such time as the $30,000 should be paid in full. Later, Sutter regretted that he didn't move down to the Russian holdings from his own place on the Sacramento. Instead, he moved great quantities of cattle and horses, machinery, boats, etc., up the river to New Helvetia. Much that was left of Forts Bodega and Ross was stolen.

These were busy years for Sutter. He had become a citizen of Mexico, but when the Spanish-Americans of California declared themselves independent of that country, Sutter went along with them. He and his settlers

fought bravely for independence. Sutter was given the title of general. You can see his full-length portrait in the uniform of a general hanging in the statehouse in Sacramento today.

Sutter's retinue of soldiers and farm laborers grew bigger and bigger. More and more people came to live off the bounty of his holdings. As a result, he never had much real money. The Russian purchase that should have made him richer than the Czar himself actually profited him very little. Later he lost all claim to it because of title trouble.

Then one day a man named Marshall in Sutter's employ discovered gold on the land at New Helvetia. This frightened Sutter and filled him with a strange, prophetic foreboding. He was excited over the yellow metal, however, and promptly set about mining it. But the influx of gold-maddened miners and others swept California.

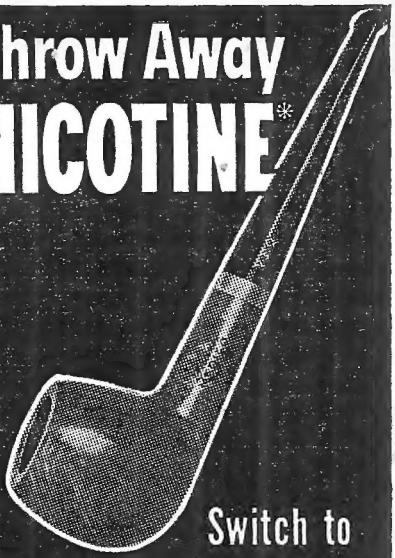
Some were after gold and took it where they could find it; but others were thieves, renegades and cutthroats. They took whatever they found—livestock, produce, anything of value. Sutter's home was burned. He was cleaned out of all the riches and possessions he had prized. There was no help to be had from the powers in California. Over and over he petitioned the government in Washington for help, but nothing came of his plea. He lost all his New Helvetia property, as well as his Russian holdings. Mostly it was occupied by squatters who were never ousted from the land.

John Sutter spent his last years in Lititz, Pennsylvania, where he established a home, and in Washington, D. C., where he died in 1880. The Associated Pioneers of the Territorial Days of California in the nation's capital conducted the old general to his final resting place in Lititz. General H. G. Gibson delivered the eulogy. General Fremont, who at the time of the Mexican War had exchanged bitter words with Sutter, used touching expressions of praise in parting from his "friend, companion and associate of long years."

Thirty years later, the people of California erected a fitting monument to the "Pioneer of Pioneers" by restoring Fort Sutter to its original state. Thus passed on old Frontiersman—honored in death, although he died unrewarded and deeply disappointed.

—*Buck Benson*

Throw Away NICOTINE*



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Not for Cowboys

An Interview with THE OLD-TIMER

I HAD just moved up beside the old-timer, when he observed, "Milkin' cows ain't a proper job for a real cowboy."

"They wouldn't be caught doing it on their regular job on the ranch," I admitted, "but it's sure fun at a rodeo. Just watch," I urged.

Well, all through the wild hilarity of that event, the old-timer laughed harder than anybody. I was afraid at times he'd fall off the fence. After the performance was over, he told me how he had milked cows, against his will, when a lad.

"I was yearling size," he said, "when my Pa quit as foreman on a ranch in Arizona and took up a little claim of his own. Trouble swooped down on the lot of us like a darned bald eagle the second summer. Our two milk cows went dry at the same time, and Pa realized something had to be done.

"Takin' me along, he rode forth to round up some wild cows on the open range. Pretty soon we spotted an unbranded cow with a young calf and we tried to run her into a corral, but the she critter was too smart for us. She wouldn't let a rope or the corral come close to her.

" 'She'll follow her calf anywhere,' Pa said. 'We'll run it into the corral.'

Trapping the Critter

"And tha's what we done. I roped the calf to the far fence, and leaving the gate open, we hid ourselves and horses in the brush and waited. Soon the wild cow come lookin' for her calf, and as soon she was inside the corral, Pa dashed up and closed the gate. The critter went crazy wild when she realized she was trapped. Pa roped her to a post in the corral. Gradually, while she was charging madly about, he took up the slack until she was snubbed up close to the post.

" 'She's too excited to let down her milk,' Pa said, 'but maybe you can get a cupful for Ma and the baby. Get your pail!'

" 'I don't know how to milk,' " I hollered, "knowing no self-respecting cowboy would ever consent to milkin' a cow."

" 'If you don't choose to help out in this here crisis,' Pa cried. 'I'll be obliged to ride over to Johnson's ranch and sell that roan of yours to the Swede. Ma and the baby have got to have milk.' And he made as though to ride off.

"Pa had me licked and he knew it, for that little roan of mine was my pride and joy. So I untied the pail from the saddle strap and then Pa roped the cow-critter's hind legs so she couldn't kick. Then I took my first lesson in milkin', Pa doing the coaching. But I didn't get more'n a third of a teacup in all. 'Takes practice, that's all,' Pa said.

"Next day we corraled three wet cows and I milked them all. I learned to milk real good before the summer was over."

Thirty Head of Jerseys

At that, the old-timer slowly slid down off the fence.

"Yep," he said, "got a dairy herd of my own twenty miles up the creek there. I'll be getting on back to the ranch; soon be milkin' time. Thirty head of Jerseys," he added.

"You mean you're going to milk thirty cows?" I asked, surprised. The sun was nearly down!

The old-timer's eyes twinkled sort of wicked like.

"Not me, partner," he said. "My whole darned dairy herd is wired to electricity. Why, all I do is turn on the current and those dang fangled machines do the milkin' quicker'n I could rope a steer. Nope," he said, "milkin' ain't no proper sort of job for a cowboy—no time!"

And as I watched him climb into his high-powered automobile and drive away, I wasn't so sure!

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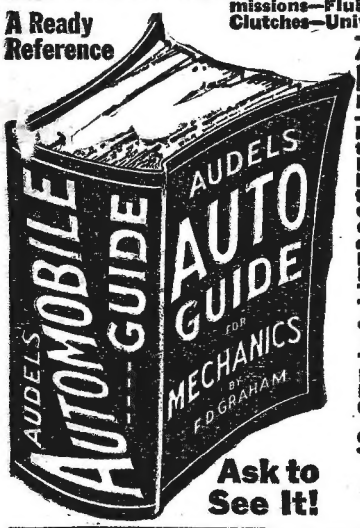

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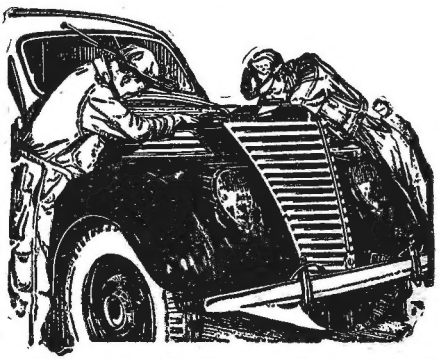

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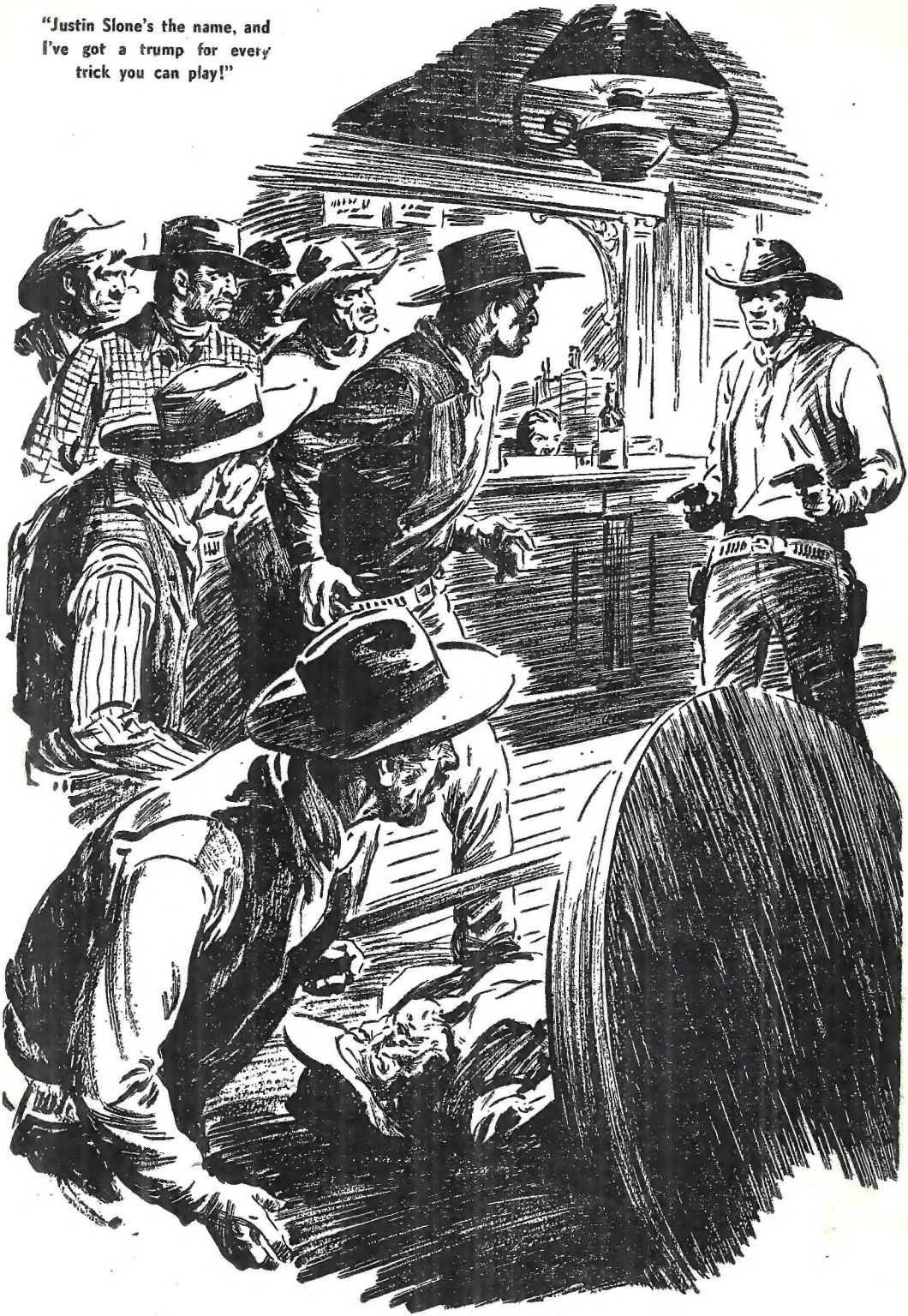
"Justin Slone's the name, and I've got a trump for every trick you can play!"



Always ready for a fight or a frolic, he came to Arizona and found plenty of both—as well as a girl worth battling for

The TEXAN

A Novel by A. LESLIE

CHAPTER I

Death in the Mesquite

"YOU flop-eared misfit, get your nose out of that biscuit pan!"

Jed Slone took a swipe at Jenny. The little burro dodged back a few paces and brayed derisively. Slone rescued the biscuits and shook his fist at Jenny. Blaze, Slone's tall glistening roan with a white star on his forehead, eyed the ruckus with mild interest and chewed meditatively on a mouthful of grass.

"You slab-sided widelooper, some day I'll slit your neck and shove your leg through it!" Slone told the burro. Jenny did not appear much impressed.

Whistling as tunefully as the birds in the thickets, Slone busied himself with preparations for breakfast. He grinned affectionately at Jenny, who was nosing about and waiting for the biscuit she knew would soon be coming her way.

"Yes, you're a darn nuisance," Slone told her, "but you do come in sort of handy. If it wasn't for you I'd have tightened my belt more'n once during the past month. Packin' along your own grub sure beats chuckline ridin'. Clean across New Mexico, and lots of times two days' ridin' without sightin' a ranchhouse. They sure did stretch this country out when they built it. This here Arizona range is even more scattered than New Mexico or west Texas, too, and they stood a heap of it on end. Mountains everywhere you look. I've a notion we can tie onto a good

job of ridin' hereabouts, though. 'Bout time. We've done enough loafin' for a spell. Here, you ornery work dodger, here's your helpin' of biscuit. Hope it burns a blister on your blasted nose."

Jenny bolted the biscuit and asked for more. Slone handed her another, then addressed himself to his own breakfast. Finished, he cleaned up camp with the dispatch of an old campaigner. He rolled a cigarette with the long and slender fingers of his left hand and smoked in leisurely fashion while the sun climbed over the lofty crests of the Chiricahuas and flooded the San Pedro Valley with liquid gold.

Finally he pinched out the butt and stood up to the full of his lean, broad-shouldered six feet. The sunlight glowed on his craggy, rough-hewn face and reflected from his steady blue eyes. His rather wide mouth grin-quirked at the corners as his gaze rested on Jenny, who had been nosing around where he had knocked out the residue of flour from the biscuit pan. Her muzzle was fluffed with white, lending her a false dignity of age.

SLONE hitched his heavy double cartridge belts a trifle higher about his sinewy waist, his hands dropping mechanically to the black butts of the heavy guns snugged in their holsters, making sure that they worked smoothly in the sheaths. Then he tied up his pack and diamond-hitched it to the burro's back. He proceeded then to get the rig on Blaze.

Anyone with an eye to riding gear would have instantly known that Jed Slone was a Texas cowhand. He rode a low-horned and, at first appearance, a clumsy-looking saddle with two cinches, the rear one a piece of stiff leather, the front one of horsehair. Neither was more than three inches wide.

Instead of long, flexible latigos of soft whang leather, so prized by the Arizona puncher, he had a heavy leather strap, much like that which a cautious traveler buckles around an old-fashioned curve-top trunk. The strap had holes punched in it and a buckle instead of a ring on the cinch. Odd looking, but sensible.

When Slone's saddle needed tightening, he did not have to get down and fiddle with latigos with their fancy loops. He just leaned over, grabbed his "trunk strap," pulled it up a couple of holes and caught the tongue of the buckle in the hole. A decided time saver.

His bit was a simple affair and devoid of ornament, with a "U" in the center of the bar which was not more than an inch high. His reins were not the fancy pleated reins of the Arizonian. They were simply long and heavy straps about an inch in width. Not tied together, they could be dropped open onto the ground, to trail on either side of the horse. Which was enough "tying" for a well-trained Texas cayuse.

On his saddle he packed a plain sisal rope tied hard and fast to the horn. There were no chains or other jingling ornaments to his plain steel spurs with their solid rowels about two inches wide.

His garb was equally plain and serviceable—faded blue denim overalls, batwing chaps, soft blue shirt with a vivid neckerchief lending the only touch of color, and sagging vest. His crisp chestnut hair was covered with a battered, broad-brimmed "J.B." creased and dimpled to afford the utmost in comfort and protection from sun and rain.

Slone had made his camp in a thicket far up on the northeastern slopes of the Huachuca Mountains. Now he began the descent to the sun-drenched valley of the San Pedro. The winding trail, coming up from the Mexican border on the south, was flanked on either side by thick chaparral growth and flowed across a shoulder of the mountains.

It was silent on the wooded slope, with only the twittering of birds in the thickets and the soughing of a gentle wind through the branches to blunt the sharp edge of the stillness. The click of Blaze's irons and the dainty patter of Jenny's little hoofs sounded unduly loud. Slone lounged easily in saddle, humming under his breath and occasionally addressing remarks to the great roan and the diminutive burro.

His head jerked up as from somewhere below sounded the hard, metallic clang of a rifle shot.

"Now what?" he muttered. "Gosh! Sounds like a regular feudin' down there in the brush. Listen to them guns lettin' go!"

For perhaps half a minute the fusillade continued, swiftly drawing nearer. Then abruptly the sounds ceased.

Slone pulled Blaze to a halt and sat listening intently.

After a moment or two another sound

JED SLONE

—who waged his own private war amid the famous heroes and notorious gunfighters of Tombstone in its heyday!

broke the silence, the sound of swift hoofs pounding up the trail. Slone's brows drew together. He glanced about.

"Feller," he said to the roan, "I got a feelin' it wouldn't be a bad notion if we got a look-see at such hard-ridin' gents before they spot us. Never can tell what's goin' on in a place like this."

Promptly he backed Blaze into the brush, drawing Jenny after him. All three were concealed by the chaparral.

Then he slouched in the saddle again and waited, peering through a rift in the growth.

LOUDER grew the drumming of approaching hoofs. Then around the bend to the north surged five men, driving their horses at top speed. Slone caught a glint of eyes under hat-brims drawn low. Neckerchiefs were looped up over the lower portions of faces.

The rider in front was much the tallest. His alert glances shot right and left. And just as they came opposite the unseen watcher in the brush Jenny took it into her head to let out a raucous bray.

Slone saw all five men whirl in their saddles, saw hands streak to holsters. He hit the ground the instant before the storm blast of death tore through the growth. Bullets clipped twigs from the bushes, showered down leaves. One burned a red welt along Slone's cheek.

Then his own guns let go with a rattling crash.

He heard a yell of pain, a wailing curse. He saw a man reel sideways, grabbing at his saddle-horn for support. The arm of another jerked spasmodically, then flapped against his side with a limpness that indicated a broken bone. A third rider clutched at his crimsoning shoulder.

Then they were gone, racing up the trail, volleying curses and firing wildly back over their shoulders.

Eyes blazing with wrath, lips framing unspoken oaths, Jed Slone ejected the spent shells from his guns and replaced them with fresh cartridges. Save for his bullet-creased cheek he was unhurt, and by a miracle the animals had escaped injury.

"Now what in hell was that all about?" he demanded of the roan. "What set such sidewinders on the prod? They were nervous as cats. Say, looks like hereabouts is the devil's brandin' pen for sure!"

He pushed forward and stared up the trail. Nothing was to be seen where it curved through the brush. The sound of speeding hoofs had died away. He glanced down the trail toward the bend. All was silent, and there was no motion.

He swabbed the blood from his cheek,

mounted Blaze and rode out onto the trail. With another glance southward, he finally headed toward the bend, peering and listening.

"Wonder what they were shootin' at down there?" he thought. "I've a notion we'll soon find out, and that the finding won't be over nice."

It wasn't.

Slone rode cautiously, not knowing what to expect and rendered wary by his recent hectic experience. The continued silence was grimly ominous. At first he had thought the explanation of the shooting might be that a bunch of owlhoots was being pursued by a posse, but he quickly discarded the supposition when nobody appeared from the north and the silence remained unbroken.

He began to experience a feeling of dread at the approach of each succeeding bend in the trail. It was as if a subtle inherent sense was warning him that something ghastly and sinister waited in the shadow of the encroaching growth. He swore under his breath and tried to dismiss the uneasy premonition, but the feeling persisted.

It was almost with a sense of relief when he rounded a final turn a quarter of a mile or so farther on, that he saw a horse standing with dangling reins at the side of the trail.

Nearby a motionless form was sprawled in the dust.

He drew a deep breath and quickened Blaze's pace.

Another moment and he was kneeling beside the body of a man who lay on his back with wide-flung arms, his face livid, and his breath coming in hoarse, panting gasps.

Slone uttered an exclamation of pity as he gazed at the contorted features.

"Just a kid!" he muttered. "Don't believe he's more'n twenty."

HIS eyes darkened with concern as he noted the stain on the shirt front over the left breast. He uncovered the wound and shook his head. Only a small amount of blood had seeped from the ragged tear, but as the young fellow's chest rose and fell with his rasping breathing, a frothy red bubble appeared and disappeared.

"Wind wound," Slone diagnosed. "Got him in the lungs and almighty close to the heart. This looks bad. Shot in the back and a bad rent where the slug came out. Uh-huh, dusted his coat on both sides. I'm scairt there's nothin' much I can do. Just a matter of time."

He got his canteen and bathed the wounded youth's temples with cool water. Slone knew something of rough surgery, but he realized that to attempt to dress such an injury was beyond his ability. There was no external bleeding to speak of, but that frothy bubble predicted internal hemorrhage.

"Got to get him to a doctor pronto," Slone decided, "but first I'll try and tie him up a bit."

From his saddle pouch he brought out a roll of bandage. He slit the boy's shirt, padded the wounds as best he could, and swathed the body with the bandage. Then he lifted the slight form without apparent effort and deftly mounted Blaze.

He must carry the sufferer in his arms, to cradle him as much as possible against jolting.

There did not seem to be any bone splintering, but Slone was not enough of a doctor to be sure.

He did understand, however, the danger of the sharp point of a shattered rib piercing a lung.

He gazed down compassionately into the bloodness face that was almost womanly in its delicate beauty. The features were flawlessly perfect, the long lashes of the closed eyes lay against the cheeks like black lace. Wavy brown hair clustered over a white forehead. But the boy's body, although slight, was wiry, and well-muscled.

Doubtless the slender form held unsuspected strength.

"If he just doesn't bleed to death before I reach a doctor with him, he may have a chance," Slone muttered as he quickened Blaze's pace.

The wounded man's horse ambled along behind.

CHAPTER II

The Devil's Branding Pen

IT TOOK nearly an hour to descend the mountain slope, and when they reached the more level ground of the San Pedro the wounded man was still alive. Slone began to entertain some slight hope for him. The internal bleeding must have greatly slackened, perhaps stopped altogether. He still breathed in hoarse gasps, however, and his face remained waxen-white under the tan, his eyes closed.

The growth had fallen away and the trail wound through a flood of golden sunshine. Groves and thickets dotted the wide valley floor which was grass-grown and undoubtedly fine range land. Soon they began passing cattle. Slone noted that the prevailing brand was a Cross G, the same as the burn on the boy's horse. Probably the first ranchhouse he would sight would house the owner of the land over which he was passing. This wounded lad doubtless was connected with the Cross G holdings.

Slone gazed anxiously ahead, for he had a disquieting feeling that unless he soon arrived at a place where his charge could get rest and medical attention, the dangerous injury would prove fatal. It was with a sense of relief when he topped a rise and saw, less than a mile ahead, a large ranchhouse built in the Spanish style, in a widely spaced grove of ancient oaks.

He quickened Blaze's pace and soon was entering the ranchhouse yard. He raised his voice in a shout, for nobody appeared to be around.

In answer to his hail, a man appeared in the doorway. An ancient man, it would seem, for his long hair was as white as the driven snow. He peered uncertainly in the manner of the near-sighted, although his movements were sprightly.

"What is it?" he asked in a pleasant voice.

"I've got a bad hurt man here," Slone replied. "Thought maybe you could help me do somethin' for him."

"Bring him in, at once," the old man instantly replied.

Slone dismounted lithely, cradling his unconscious burden against jar. He strode up the wide veranda steps. The old gentleman, who had a lined, kindly face, shuffled forward. Then abruptly he reeled back, clutching at his breast with a thin and gnarled hand. His voice rang out in a cry of agony:

"*Madre de Dios!* Alfred!"

"You know him, suh?" Slone asked.

"It is Alfred, my—my grandson!" panted the old man. "What has happened to him?"

"Shot," Slone replied tersely. "By some hellions up on the mountain trail. I found him and did what I could for him."

Questions began pouring from the old man's lips, but Slone abruptly stemmed the tide.

"Everything else can wait," he said. "We've got to put him to bed and get a doctor pronto."

The old man, moaning softly, turned and led the way into the house.

"Pedro! Pedro!" he called.

There was the sound of hurrying steps and the man who appeared was apparently even older than the first. But he was lance-straight, and the sureness of his step showed he had not yet lost the fire of his youth. A single glance told Slone he was a pure-blood Yaqui Indian.

His face unmoved, he took charge of things with the efficiency of the fierce mountain *Indios* to whom accident and death, swift and sharp, are no strangers.

"Come," he grunted.

He led Slone across a wide hall and up a flight of steps. There he flung open the door to a comfortably furnished room with a snowy bed. While the old man who had admitted Slone stood with trembling hands and muttering lips, the Yaqui and the cowhand removed the wounded youth's clothing and placed him between the sheets.

PEDRO eyed Slone's chore of bandaging and grunted approval,

"Do what can," he said. "Need *medico*."

"And the nearest is at Tombstone," quavered the snowy-haired old man.

"Me go, Don Roberto," said Pedro.

But Slone vetoed the offer.

"I've a notion I can travel some faster than you can," he said. "How far is Tombstone?—what direction?"

"Northeast—forty mile—follow trail, can't miss," replied the laconic Pedro. "Find Doc Goodfellow. He come."

"Okay," said Slone. "I'm ridin'."

"Wait," said Pedro. "Don Roberto stay here. You come kitchen. Meat, coffee. Ride better."

"Good," Slone agreed, with equal terseness.

He turned to follow Pedro down the stairs. Don Roberto laid a trembling hand on his arm.

"I thank you for what you did," said the old man. "From my heart I thank you."

"Wasn't anything much," Slone deprecated. "Anybody would have done the same."

"Not all—not all," replied Don Roberto with sudden bitterness.

Slone shot him a surprised glance, but the old man did not elaborate. He was gazing at the waxen face of the boy on the bed. Slone surveyed the sufferer and nodded.

"Reckon he'll pull through," he comforted the grandfather. "If the wound was goin' to kill him, it would have done it before now. If the doc can just stave off complications, I'm plumb sure he's got a chance."

The old man shot him a grateful glance.

"Come," said Pedro.

In the big sun-bright kitchen, Slone ate hastily.

"This is the Cross G *hacienda,* ain't it, Pedro?" he asked.

"*Si.*" The Yaqui nodded. "The home of Don Roberto Garcia and of his father and his father's father before him."

"Don Roberto ain't a Mexican, then?"

"No," Pedro replied. "Nor is he a don, although he is called such. The old customs remain."

"I see." Slone nodded as he downed a final cup of steaming coffee and rose to his feet. "Be seein' you, Pedro," he said, and strode out of the ranchhouse.

While Slone had been eating, Pedro had slipped out and given Blaze water in which he mixed a little brandy. Also a helping of oats and a quick rubdown. He had also made sure that Jenny's wants were provided for.

Slone let the big roan take it easy at first. Gradually, however, he increased his pace until he was racing at top speed. He eyed the terrain ahead with interest, for the country was new to him.

To the north the yellow, shadowy ramparts of the Dragoon Mountains lifted into the sky. Eastward, across the San Pedro and also slightly to the north, a group of high, unlovely hills cut the skyline. Their brown slopes were a dreary monotony of huge rocks and boulders, beetling ledges and stark cliffs. No gorges or shadowy valleys relieved their uninteresting barrenness.

They were the hills that seekers after treasure always had passed by with hardly a glance, from Coronado's time until that fateful day when Ed Schieffelin sank his pick into their forbidding breast and the flood of Tombstone silver gushed forth. It had foaled a roaring town built on a lion's paw of granite that stretched eastward from the Hills of Silver.

Still farther east was the blue and purple mystery of the Chiricahuas. Almost due east and somewhat to the south rose the strange, fantastic outlines of the Pedregosa Mountains. And on all sides rolled the beautiful rangeland of the San Pedro Valley.

SLONE forded the San Pedro River without difficulty and rode on. He passed Charleston with its thundering stamp mills that ground the Tombstone ore and garnered the treasure of silver. Ahead, less than ten miles distant, a smoke cloud fouled the blue of the sky—the smoke of Tombstone, the wildest, most novel boom town the West ever knew, perhaps.

Tombstone evolved overnight, as out of thin air. It was unique in the annals of mushrooming mining towns in that it combined the wildness of the frontier with

"I—I'm sorry, ma'am," Slone stammered. "I—I must have opened the wrong door"

the refinements of an old and ordered community. It may have had "a man for breakfast every morning," as was said, but it also had hard-working, conservative citizens, schools, churches and other elements of advanced civilization. The lurid glare of its red lights vied with the soft glow of altar candles. Its desperadoes slept between clean sheets and often donned hard-boiled shirts.

Its liquor was as potent as any served in Dodge City, Hangtown or Alder Gulch in the early days, but it was poured by white-coated barkeeps, and sipped from glasses of crystal. Tombstone was the Dawn Man stepped from the gloom of his cave into the glare of swinging lamps.

Slone entered Tombstone by way of First Street. He crossed Tough Nut and turned east on Allen Street, the town's broad and principal thoroughfare. He passed the famed Can Can Restaurant and drew near the most prominent saloons, the Crystal Palace on one corner of Fifth and Allen Streets, and the Oriental on the opposite corner.

Standing in the doorway of the Oriental was a tall, blond man with ice-blue eyes and a lionlike face. Talking with him was a slender, cadaverous individual with a sawed-off shotgun strapped beneath his faultlessly fitting gray coat.

One of these men was Wyatt Earp, the famous marshal of Dodge City and Ells-

worth and Wichita, now a deputy United States marshal and principal owner of the Oriental. The other was Doc Holliday, the coldest and most efficient killer of the Earp faction, so thin a bullet couldn't hit him, and destined to die peacefully in bed. Slone had never seen either man but he instantly recognized both from numerous descriptions.

A plump little man dressed in black came bustling along the street. Slone recognized him also—Sheriff Behan, deadly foe of the Earps. He paused to speak with a ferocious-looking individual with a long white beard and eyes like burning coals. That, thought Slone instantly, would be Old Man Clanton, head of the Clanton clan, and close associate of Curly Bill Brocius, the ablest and most notorious outlaw Arizona ever produced.

As Clanton's eyes rested on the rider of the roan horse, he started violently. Slone did not miss that, nor the black glare that followed it. He smiled thinly as he rode on.

"Spotted already, eh?" he muttered. "Well, reckon it was to be expected. That old hellion sure looks like a salty character."

HE DID not look back, but behind him Clanton continued to glare.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Sheriff Behan.

"Johnny," old Clanton said thickly, "do you know who that is? That's Justin Slone."

Behan also started then. "You mean Slone, the owlhoot?" he demanded.

"Don't know about the owlhoot part," Clanton told him. "Nobody has ever tied anything onto him, so far as I ever heard, but he's plumb bad, plumb bad. Now what in hell is he doin' here?"

"He's the feller who killed the *alcalde* of Pascua, ain't he?"

"Uh-huh. And he done in the *jefe político* of Ajo, too—him and his cussed *Dorados*. Wasn't no secret why he done it. That mayor for Pascua had a feller drygulched and killed so he could get his wife. That police chief of Ajo had a peon whipped to death for stealin' a bottle of medicine for his sick kid. Slone done for both of 'em. Down below the Line, old *el Presidente* has a standin' reward of ten thousand pesos for him, dead or alive."

"That's a heap of *dinero* for somebody to collect," Behan observed reflectively.

"No, thanks," Clanton said drily. "Not interested. I ain't got many years left, but I'd sort of like to live 'em out healthy. That Justin Slone—Jed, they call him—is a cold proposition, and don't forget it. The Earps and Doc Holliday are bad enough, but Slone's worse than all of 'em rolled together."

"You mean to say Slone could shade Holliday on the draw?" Behan asked incredulously.

"Slone would let Holliday clear leather and then pull and kill him before he could get into action," snorted Clanton. "I don't figure there's a man in Arizona who'd have a chance with him, unless it is Amado Fuentes. To see them two in action against each other! Gentlemen, hush! That would be somethin'."

"I'd like to see it," Behan declared vindictively. "Maybe they'd do in each other, and that would be plumb fine."

Something that was probably intended for a grin twisted Clanton's bearded lips.

"Just wait till Bill Brocius and John Ringo hear about this," he said. "They'll paw sod for fair. You know, Slone sort of caters to Mexicans. Don't like to see 'em mistreated."

"You mean that business in Skeleton Canyon?" Behan asked a trifle nervously. "When Miguel Garcia and his smuggler bunch was drygulched? But never mind. I don't want to hear anything about that. After all, I'm a law officer."

"That's so," said Clanton again drily. "So you be."

"But Slone's damn yellow shirts—them *Dorados* of his—hadn't better do no ridin' up here," Behan said with a belligerent air.

"Don't reckon they will," Clanton said laconically. "When he has a particular hefty chore to handle, Slone usually goes it alone. I'm sure glad I ain't a sheriff."

Behan swore at him and changed the subject.

Clanton smiled wickedly.

CHAPTER III

Challenge

AFTER asking directions from a passerby, Jed Slone located Dr. Goodfellow's office at the corner of Tremont and Fourth Streets. The doctor was in, and Slone briefly told him what had happened.

"Old Roberto Garcia's grandson, Al Cushman, eh?" said the doctor. "A nice kid, so good-lookin' he'd ought to have been a girl. Takes after his mother, Rosa Garcia. Her mother was a Fuentes. She married Jim Cushman and died when the kid was born. Don Roberto raised the kid. Jim got himself shot about a year later. The kid's hard as nails, for all his good looks, and if he wasn't dead by the time you got him to the ranch-house, he may pull through. I'll high-tail out there right away. You coming along?"

Slone shook his head. "No," he replied. "I've already covered nearly seventy miles today, and that's enough for my horse and me both. You can tell the old man I'll ride out tomorrow, though. Feel sort of an interest in the business, particularly since the gents who evidently shot young Cushman saw fit to throw a little lead in my direction, too. And for no good reason I'm able to figure out. Maybe Cushman can tell who shot him, when he's able to talk. I'd like to know who it was."

The old doctor glanced at the rugged face, now suddenly bleak. Slone's blue eyes, eyes the color of a glacial lake under a summer sky, were gazing into space.

"The gents who did that shootin' will be mighty lucky if this big hellion don't find out who they are," the doctor told himself.

Slone watched the doctor start on his forty-mile ride. Then he hunted up a stable for his horse and repaired to the Can Can Restaurant for something to eat. After smoking a leisurely cigarette, he strolled out to look the town over.

Tombstone was at the height of its prosperity and the depths of its depravity. It had covered the lion's paw down to the claws in the mesquite. The Lucky Cuss, the Tough Nut, the Grand Central, the Contention and other mines poured forth their seemingly inexhaustible flood of treasure, and to Tombstone it semed that the flood would continue for years to come.

Tombstone reacted accordingly. There was no night in Tombstone, only stars instead of blue skies, blazing lamps instead of golden sunshine. The roar of activity, of frenzied life, whirled the clock hands under a perpetual high noon. Peace and darkness and nocturnal quiet, the rosy blush of dawn and the scarlet glow of evening might come to the desert and the hills beyond the mesquite flats, but the mighty march of the eternities passed Tombstone by.

From the four corners of the West, and beyond, came the stampede of fortune hunters. California, Texas, Kansas and Nevada broadened the stream. Miners were the vanguard, with the saloonkeeper a close second. Next came the inevitable camp followers—gamblers, dance hall women, owhoots. Tombstone took unto itself Dodge City, San Antonio, Abilene, Poker Flat, Deadwood, Virginia City and Hangtown and became a part of all of them. And went them all one better. The city on the lion's paw seethed and thundered and lived a year in a day.

But in the black darkness beneath the hills, a prisoned monster bided its time in silence, waiting for the day when it would burst its chains and write the doom of Tombstone with liquid fingers upon the black rock slabs of the Sulphuret Mine.

None of Tombstone's bustling thousands, however, gave thought to the waiting monster. None knew it even existed. If they had known, they would not have believed in it. When Jed Slone walked slowly along Allen Street, Tombstone believed itself as eternal as the Silver Hills themselves.

ALLEN Street was stately in width. It was solidly built up with one-story business houses, some of frame, some of

brick, and some of adobe. Here and there towered a two-story or even a three-story skyscraper like a dignified swan amid a throng of dissolute ducks. The sidewalks were sheltered from the sun by projecting roofs that formed wooden awnings supported at the curb by poles.

The street roared with traffic. There were wagon trains loaded with lumber cut in the saw mills in the Chiricahuas and Huachucas. Stages to and from Benson, Bisbee, Tucson and Fort Huachuca raised clouds of dust. Ore wagons rumbled along, as did carts loaded with portly silver bricks cast in two-hundred-pound weights which were inconvenient to pack on horseback, in order to discourage gentlemen with unconventional notions concerning the policy of "share the wealth."

Cowboys on horseback flashed by, weaving in and out of the lines of moving vehicles with a fine disregard for life, limb and the general peace-of-mind. Other gentlemen who looked like cowhands, but weren't, also rode past and were accorded searching looks by law officers, bankers, and other prosperous citizens.

Slone, after a long spell in the lonely wastelands, felt his pulses quicken to this scene of bustling activity. Wandering aimlessly about, he found himself in the dubious quarter adjoining the business district. The streets were lined with cribs, restaurants, and palatial establishments catering to the desires of more exclusive patrons who preferred this shadowy section to the more open places in Allen and Fremont Streets. The more dignified establishments were cheek by jowl to saloons of the rougher sorts and dance halls where crowds reveled to the music of Mexican orchestras.

Slone gradually made his way toward the Bisbee road. Close to the encroaching mesquite he spotted a small building housing a saloon. He felt thirsty and decided a glass of beer wouldn't go bad. So he headed for the building.

In the saloon, seven men were playing poker and, had he known it, had been playing for a night and a day. At the table was Curly Bill Brocius, leader of the outlaws of Cochise County. He was a big, burly fellow with snapping black eyes, a round swarthy face and a shock of curly black hair, almost negroid in its kinkiness, that gave him his nickname. He was powerful, quick as a cat, and usually jovial, but when aroused could be a demon of ferocity.

Seated beside him was John Ringo, darkly handsome, tragic, splendidly brave, with brooding eyes that looked back upon a life designed for better things, thrown recklessly away. His lean, saturnine face was always sad in expression and he seldom smiled. He was addicted to moods of bitter melancholy in which he often spoke of suicide.

There also was pot-valiant Ike Clanton, vicious Jim Hill, the two McLowrey brothers and Jim Hughes. Altogether as choice a bunch of salty gents as one could hope to meet up with within a month of hard riding.

The swinging doors of the saloon had been hooked wide open because of the heat, and through the opening drifted a rumble of conversation and a clinking of glasses that Slone could hear as he approached the building.

Suddenly a stutter of shots sounded, and a screeching yell. Out of the mesquite bulged a wild-eyed horseman waving a smoking gun and whooping like a Comanche. His grizzled beard was fanned out on either side of his wrinkled face by the wind of his passing. Straight for the open door he streaked his blowing horse, and through the opening. The animal's irons thundered on the floor boards, rasped, and skated to a halt amid a storm of oaths and ejaculations.

"I'm takin' over here!" bellowed the rider. His gun boomed emphasis to his remark.

THERE was an instant of stunned silence. Then the building seemed to explode with a roar of six-shooters. Out of the door tore the frenzied horse, saddle empty, pommel shot to shreds. It raced into the mesquite and disappeared.

Slone continued to walk slowly toward the building. He entered the saloon and glanced about.

Grouped around an overturned table were seven men, staring at a body on the floor. Behind the bar cringed a pallid-faced drink juggler. An equally pallid-faced waiter crouched in a corner. The body of the horseman was riddled with bullets.

Slone raised his eyes to the silent group to meet suspicious and questioning glances.

"Wasn't much of a chance he had, was it?" he remarked. "Seven against one, an old jigger and drunk to boot. Looks like one of you supposed-to-be tough hombres could have knocked that empty iron out of his hand instead of shootin' him to pieces."

Curly Bill's face flushed darkly red. His black eyes sparkled.

"Listen, feller," he rumbled menacingly, "you can't come in here and tell us what to do or what not to do. Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

His hand dropped to his gun butt as he spoke, moved the big Colt a little in its sheath, suggestively. Then he froze, every muscle rigid. His companions stood tense and motionless, staring into two unwavering black muzzles that just "happened" to be yawning toward them.

Nobody had seen Slone draw. One second his hands were empty. The next they were filled with death. He spoke, his voice silkily smooth, his words evenly spaced.

"Justin Slone's the name, and I've got a trump for every trick you can play. Step up, boys. Don't be bashful!"

But the "boys" were bashful. They glared at the tall Texan, but no one made a move. Curly Bill finally spoke, his voice hoarse with passion, his hand still gripping his gun butt.

"You can't get away with this, feller!" he cried. "Right now you got us covered, but a time'll come when you ain't got the drop on us. And then—*yowp!*"

The ejaculation was shot out of Brocius with unusual vigor as Slone's hands moved with such blinding speed that Curly Bill never saw how the big guns got back into their sheaths. All he could see was Slone standing before him, empty hands hanging loosely by his sides.

"Haven't got you covered now," Jed Slone observed.

Curly Bill mouthed and gurgled. His companions glared, all except John Ringo, into whose eyes crept an amused twinkle.

They were hard men in that room, cold killers, every one of them. And the majority of them knew fear only as a word in the dictionary. But they hesitated. They could get Slone perhaps. But each knew that the first man to reach would never know what hit him. And each had a not unnatural aversion to being first.

"I wasn't particularly scared," John Ringo afterward said, "but I didn't want to die just then, and I knew if I made a move, I *would* die. Reckon the rest of the boys felt the same about it. Oh, I suppose we could have got him. We were seven to one, but considerable of us wouldn't have been there at the gettin'. I don't usually sidestep trouble when some gent hankers to bring it to me, but that big Texan was too darn willin' to be accommodatin'!"

[*Turn page*]

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CHAPTER IV

The First Try

RINGO it was who broke the tension in the saloon.

"Slone," he said in pleasantly conversational tones, "why don't you throw in with us instead of buckin' us? It would be to your advantage. Reckon you know us. That's Bill Brocius you're talkin' to."

Jed Slone fished the "makin's" from his pocket and began rolling a cigarette with his left hand. He shook his head.

"Not my style," he said. "I ride alone."

"Except when your damned *Dorados* ride with you," growled Curly Bill, beginning to fashion a brain tablet himself.

"They don't ride up here—yet," Slone replied. "If I should stop ridin', unexpectedly, they might—more'n you ever heard of, Brocius, more'n you ever dreamed of. Remember that when I turn my back on you."

He lighted his cigarette, nodded to John Ringo, turned and walked out the door.

Curly Bill Brocius swore venomously. Jim Hill chuckled. John Ringo stared after Slone, his tortured eyes dark with banished hopes and broken dreams.

"A man, that," he said slowly. "Rides a straight trail, and rides it alone. Yes, he's what I always wanted to be, never was, and never will be—a *man*!"

Slone's eyes were thoughtful as he walked back toward the business section of Tombstone. He knew well enough he had thrown down the gauntlet to a killer criminal organization, the boldest, deadliest and most powerful the Southwest ever knew.

Curly Bill Brocius was the prototype of a Middle Ages robber baron. He took killings in his stride as minor matters of business. And behind him rode thirty or forty as desperate men as ever forked a bronc.

Curly Bill's stronghold at Galeyville in the Chiricahuas was a veritable "castle at the crossroads" from which he ruled a territory larger than many a medieval kingdom. His followers wore chaps and overalls instead of steel and leather. The six-shooter had supplanted the long bow. But they were men to reckon with.

Wyatt Earp and his brother Virgil, the town marshal, had to a certain extent cleaned up Tombstone. But all around this oasis of comparative law-and-order was the dark shadow of outlawry that was supreme in Cochise and adjoining counties.

A short distance from the saloon, Slone met Sheriff Behan hurrying down the street. Behan gave him a suspicious glance.

"Thought I heard shootin' down this way," he remarked.

Slone jerked his thumb toward the building he had just left. "Go in there and I reckon you'll hear about it," he said, and walked on.

Behan stared after him, then hurried to the saloon, muttering under his breath.

Slone smiled a trifle as he turned the corner. He had formed a shrewd estimate of the little sheriff. Johnny Behan was an honest man and a good man, he decided. But he was in the wrong setting. He was more the politician than the efficient law officer. In an orderly community, he would have stood out. But he was too-small caliber for Tombstone.

It was some time after dark when Slone entered the Oriental Saloon in quest of something to eat. Standing at the bar were Wyatt Earp and two men Slone decided from their looks, were undoubtedly his brothers. There was Morgan, with his fresh young fighter's face, bold blue-gray eyes, yellow hair, straight, stalwart figure. Beside him stood Virgil, stern, soldierly, gaunt, with brooding eyes. The saturnine, immaculate Doc Holliday lounged near, as usual.

AS SLONE walked past, Wyatt Earp reached out and touched him on the shoulder.

"Want to congratulate you," he said as Slone paused with a questioning glance.

"What for?" Slone asked.

"For bucking Bill Brocius and his bunch," Wyatt said in his deep, lion-brool of a voice. "The barkeep of that rumhole

told me about it."

"Thanks," Slone replied. "but I didn't do much."

"More'n anybody else hereabouts has ever done, I'd say," returned Wyatt.

"I heard Curly Bill went over and chawed the leg off a table, after you left," chuckled Morgan. "Bill doesn't like to take water."

"But son, you made a bad bunch of enemies," cautioned the sober and conservative Virgil. "You want to keep your eyes open. Brocius won't get over it. He's that sort. Never forgets. Never forgives. He's been waiting a chance to do for Wyatt ever since Wyatt pistol-whipped him and busted his head open the night he killed Marshal White here in Tombstone."

"Have to give Bill credit for one thing in that ruckus," observed Wyatt. "I don't think he aimed to kill Fred White. They were scufflin' for the gun when it went off. White said that himself before he died. But I had to knock Bill out in order to arrest him, and he'll never get over it. I've a pretty good idea you can take care of yourself though, Slone. We've heard of you, even up here."

"That old feller they killed was a sort of hanger-on of theirs over to Galeyville," remarked Virgil. "Harmless enough when sober, but plumb loco when full of red-eye. He shot a hole through the poker table with his last ca'tridge. The bartender and the waiter of that rumhole testified to it, so when Brocius and his bunch pleaded self-defense, Johnny Behan accepted the plea."

"He would," grunted Wyatt.

Doc Holliday had drawn near. "The mistake you made, Slone," he said cheerfully, "was in not downin' every one of 'em when you had the drop on 'em. You'd have been doing a plumb service to the community. Hope you'll use better judgment next time."

The cheerful philosophy of this killer whose profession was dentistry, was primitively simple. Kill your enemy when you have the chance, then you'll have no more trouble with him, was Holliday's code, and he practiced it.

Slone chuckled and, with a nod, walked to a table and sat down. He noted that he was suddenly an object of interest to those around him. A friendly attitude on the part of the Earps carried much weight in Tombstone.

Slone ate a leisurely meal and then, thoroughly tired out, went to bed to sleep the night through without interruption. Early morning found him started on his forty-mile ride back to Roberto Garcia's ranchhouse. He rode steadily at a good pace. He forded the San Pedro, passed Charleston and Contention City and rode on.

Five miles southwest of the river, the trail dipped over a crest and wound down a long sag to a level and straight stretch more than a mile in extent. Just north of the next bend, which Slone had noted on his trip to Tombstone, was a spring a dozen yards or so west of the trail. The water of the spring formed a pool that was shut off from the trail by a natural wall of rock about breast high on a tall man. A gulley wound up from the trail to the little hollow that accommodated the pool.

Slone proposed to pause at the spring to give Blaze a drink and a breather. He was still more than a thousand yards from the spring when he saw a small burro deer daintily cross the trail and head up the gulch. The next instant the deer flashed back into view, going like the wind. It streaked across the trail and vanished into the growth.

"Now what set that feller off?" Slone wondered. "A cat critter having a drink, maybe?"

But as he rode on, no other animal appeared from the gulch. Slone eyed the silent rim of the hollow with thoughtful interest.

"I'm plumb certain there's something holed up in there, but what?" he muttered.

HE REACHED down and made sure his heavy Winchester was free in the saddle-boot snugged under his left thigh. This was no country to take chances with anything out of the ordinary.

He veered Blaze until he was well away from the center of the trail. The chaparral

was some distance off, but edging the trail on either side was tall grass. Slone kept his eyes glued to the ominously silent rim.

The thousand yards shrank to six hundred, to five—four—three—two. Another fifty yards with nothing happening. Then, as if jerked into view by invisible strings, five heads popped over the rim. Heads, shoulders, and five leveled rifles.

But Slone was ready. Even as the rifles flamed he was out of the saddle, slewing sideways to the ground. As he went down, he gripped the Winchester and slid it from the boot. Snugged in the tall grass, he threw the rifle to his shoulder.

"Cover, feller!" he shouted to the roan. With a snort, Blaze streaked for the brush.

Slone's eyes glanced along the sights. Smoke wisped from the rifle barrel. The wailing yell of one of the drygulchers echoed the boom of the report. The smoking muzzle moved the merest trifle, gushed fire again. Another man went hurtling backward as if hit by the beam of a swinging derrick. Three heads vanished from sight. A storm of curses arose from the bowl beyond the rim.

Slone lay tense and ready, his eyes never leaving the rim of dark rock. Minutes passed, with nothing happening. Then there was a clatter of hoofs. Four horsemen burst into view from the gulch, one lurching and reeling in his saddle. They spun their mounts and went racing southward for the bend.

Slone's Winchester spoke twice more before they whisked around the turn and out of sight. He waited a moment, then got to his feet. He removed his hat and looked at it. There were two bullet-holes in the crown, another in the rim.

"Nice shootin'," he muttered. "If it hadn't been for that deer, the chances are they'd have drilled me dead center. Well, one of them is the other side that slab of rock now, to stay. And another wasn't settin' his hull any too comfortable. Don't waste much time gettin' into action, that bunch. Wonder if Brocius was with 'em? Chances are he wasn't, though. This is the kind of a chore he'd turn over to the hired hands."

He whistled to Blaze, and the roan trotted out of the brush with an inquiring glance. Obediently he followed as Slone slowly approached the rock wall, cocked rifle at the ready.

Everything was quiet as he rounded the lip of stone and turned into the gulch. Another moment and he was gazing down into the face of a dead man who lay beside the pool. There was a blue hole between his staring eyes.

"Breed, I'd say, from the looks of him," Slone thought grimly. "Not one of the bunch I braced in the saloon. This is a trick I took, I reckon. But I'm in for it. This won't be the last try." He turned and patted the roan on the rump.

"Have a drink, feller," he muttered. "Glad that hellion didn't fall in the water and bloody it all up. Think I'll have a swig myself. Then we'll amble."

CHAPTER V

Amado Fuentes

SLONE rode slowly and warily, surveying the country ahead with a carping gaze. From time to time his keen eyes noted blood spots staining the dust of the trail, but gradually these ceased to appear.

"Dark, venous blood, not arterial," he told the roan, since there was no other to hear his comments. "Either stopped flowing or he's managed to tie up the wound. Just nicked, chances are. Hope he got it where he sits the hull. That would make him plenty uncomfortable on a long ride. Sort of logical to believe they'll circle around and double back to Tombstone, or maybe to Galeyville. That's Curly Bill's hangout, they say, in the Chiricahuas east of the San Simon Valley."

Evening was near when Roberto Garcia's stately *hacienda* came into view.

Cowhands were lounging about as Slone rode into the ranchhouse yard. Some were undoubtedly Arizonians. Others were dark-faced *vaqueros*. All surveyed him in silence as he dismounted

and left Blaze standing. As he mounted the veranda steps, Pedro, the Yaqui cook, appeared in the doorway. He grunted a word of welcome and led the way inside.

Dr. Goodfellow was sitting by the window, smoking. Across from him sat Roberto Garcia, his old face lined and weary, but with a glad light in his faded eyes. He rose to his feet and greeted Slone with courtly grace. The doctor waved his pipe and nodded. Slone shot him a questioning glance.

"He'll pull through," said Goodfellow, correctly interpreting the glance. "Thanks to you. If it hadn't been for those compresses you applied I reckon he'd have bled to death. That shut out the air and hastened clotting. Bullet just grazed the outer lobe of the lung. Went through clean. Busted one rib, but didn't splinter it. No signs of trouble developing. Figure he'll be out lookin' for another chance to get shot in a few weeks."

"Tell you how it happened?" Slone asked.

The doctor shook his head. "Soon as he got his senses back, I told him not even to speak till I give the word," he explained. "I'll let him talk some this evening. I'm staying over another night. After that you and Pedro can look after him."

Pedro stuck his head in the door.

"Eat," he said laconically, and vanished.

Slone washed up and enjoyed an excellent meal with Don Roberto, the doctor, and nearly a dozen cowhands who, knowing now who he was, shot friendly grins in his direction.

After eating, they sat in the big living room and talked and smoked. Finally Doc Goodfellow knocked out his pipe and rose to his feet.

"Reckon we can take a chance on a little pow-wow with young Cushman," he announced.

They found the patient awake. There was a tinge of color in his cheeks and his breathing was easy. The doctor nodded approvingly.

"Just a few words," he cautioned Slone.

"First off, any notion who shot you, feller?" Slone asked.

"No," came the whispered reply. "Men rode out of the brush behind me and cut loose. First slug drilled me and nearly knocked me out of the hull. I managed to keep riding for a while, then I went down. Last I remember. But," he added in slow, evenly spaced words, "it must have been some of the Galeyville bunch. They swore to get me."

"That'll do," said the doctor.

Slone nodded. "We'll talk about it more later," he told Alfred Cushman. With another nod to the patient, he followed Garcia out of the room. The doctor remained with the injured man.

IN THE living room, Slone turned to Garcia.

"Anything you can add to what he said?" he asked the old man.

"Not much," replied Garcia. "I believe Alfred was right when he said some of the Galeyville outlaws shot him. They hate us. Partly because they consider me a Mexican, which I am not. More because we refused to pay tribute to them, as do many of the rancheros hereabouts."

Slone nodded. He understood that.

"Don't blame you," he said, "but that kind of a stand usually means trouble. I saw considerable of it down below the Line."

The old man's lined face became grim. "I am a free American citizen, beholden to no man," he said. "Why should I fawn and crawl before a lot of thieves and killers?"

"You shouldn't," Slone returned briefly. "The more you crawl, the more they'll expect you to crawl. This part of the country needs a cleanin' up. I believe you said the young feller is your grandson, didn't you?"

"Yes," Garcia replied. "He is the son of my daughter, who, like her mother before her, inherited the famed beauty of the Fuentes—the Fuentes, the comeliest men and loveliest women in the land. Alfred also has that beauty. He is as handsome, almost, as his cousin, Amado

Fuentes, owner of the Fuentes ranch, the FA. It lies to the south and east of my Cross G, a splendid property. Amado does not pay tribute, either. He is a stern man and the outlaws hate and fear him. He should be here later. I sent word of Alfred's mishap and he replied that he would visit him today. He and Alfred do not love each other much, but misfortune tends to draw kinsmen together."

Slone wondered what were the differences between the cousins, but Garcia did not elaborate. Instead, he asked a question.

"You are a stranger, here, are you not?"

"That's so," Slone agreed.

"And have you any particular destination in mind?"

Slone shook his head. "Just sort of chuckline ridin'. Thought I might tie onto a job of ridin' somewhere hereabouts."

"There can be no difficulty about that," Garcia declared, with a smile. "In fact, you need look no further. The doctor tells me that Alfred will be unable to ride or work for weeks, perhaps for several months. For the past two years he has practically taken over the duties of running the ranch. While I still enjoy good health and am strong for my years, thanks be to *el Dios,* I cannot ride as I once did. I need someone to take Alfred's place. My men, while good workers, and able, are scarce fitted for the responsibilities. Nothing would please me better than to make you range boss of the ranch during Alfred's incapacitation. And after he recovers you would still hold the same position should you desire to, with him taking over the duties of the owner, which he eventually will be. He is my sole heir."

"Well"—Slone smiled—"I reckon I could do a lot worse. Looks like you've hired yourself a hand."

"Good!" exclaimed Garcia heartily. "We must drink on it. Pedro," he called, "bring from the cellar a bottle of the oldest vintage, and be careful you do not shake it."

While they were discussing the wine, which Slone found to be excellent, there was a sound of hoofs outside.

"That would be Amado Fuentes," said Garcia. "I hope you will like Amado. He is an able man, but inclined to be impetuous."

A man appeared in the doorway and stood framed in the golden glow of the dying sunlight. He was a veritable echo of Garcia's remark, "the famed beauty of the Fuentes." To Slone's mind instinctively came a passage of Scripture as he looked on his flawless features:

> From the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, there was no blemish in him.

Thus spake the prophet of Absalom, the wayward son of the Great King, who had his brother murdered and stirred up rebellion against his own father. But still:

> In all Israel there was none to be so much praised for his beauty.

AMADO FUENTES was a tall man, almost as tall as Slone himself, with broad shoulders and a deep chest. His waist was sinewy, his hips slim and flat. His features were cameo-perfect in their regularity. His crisply golden hair swept back from his broad forehead in a lion-like mane. His eyes were so darkly blue as to seem black. His bearing was assured to the verge of arrogance.

He acknowledged Garcia's greeting with a nod of his shapely head and shot a questioning glance at Slone. He shook hands with a steely grip when Garcia performed the introductions.

"Glad to know you, Slone," he said, his voice deep and musical. "What about Alfred, Cousin Roberto?"

Garcia told him, stressing the part Slone played in the occurrence. Fuentes nodded again.

"Some of Brocius' bunch, all right," he said. "You know I anticipated something like this. Chances are they'll be after you too, Slone, if you stick around."

Slone shrugged his broad shoulders. "I'll chance it," he replied carelessly.

"Mr. Slone is certainly going to stick around." Old Garcia smiled. "I just hired him as my range boss while Alfred is laid up."

Fuentes shot Slone a quick glance and

it seemed to the cowboy that his finely formed mouth tightened the merest trifle.

"Looks capable, all right, but you'll need a good man, Roberto," was all he said, however.

Slone had a feeling, though, that Fuentes was not altogether sure of the wisdom of the move. Which, after all, he was forced to admit, was not unreasonable.

"Has Gypsy got back from Tucson yet?" Fuentes asked.

"No," Garcia replied. "She should arrive some time tomorrow. Everything all right at your place?"

Fuentes shrugged. "Lost some more cows," he said. "Nobody hurt this time, though, which is something."

"We have been plagued by rustlers of late," Garcia explained to Slone. "We always have been, to a certain extent, but in recent months it has become serious."

"And it will continue to get worse until that nest of thieves over at Galeyville is cleaned out," Fuentes observed.

"You notified the sheriff of your loss?" asked Garcia.

"Lots of sense in notifying Johnny Behan," Fuentes scoffed. "He's hand-in-glove with that bunch, and you know it. Besides, Behan has no use for me. Not since he heard I intend to back Wyatt Earp if he decides to run for sheriff."

The old man shook his head sadly, but did not comment.

After a few minutes of casual conversation, Fuentes took his leave, promising to call again soon.

"A true Fuentes," Garcia said musingly, when he was gone. "Proud, stubborn, utterly fearless and able. A man who can hate."

"Not much sense in hatin'," Slone replied. "Hurts you worse'n it does the other feller. If you have a chore to do, do it, but don't waste time holdin' grudges. I did a few down below the Line, as the chances are you'll hear, sooner or later, but I can't say as I felt any particular hatred for the jiggers I went up against, after a while."

"Pedro, who seems to know a great deal

[*Turn page*]

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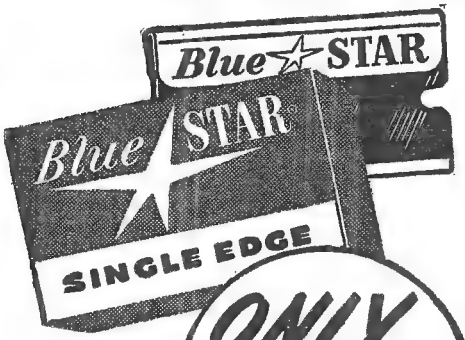

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about you, told me of some of the things you did," Garcia said gently. "As Pedro tells it, they were to your credit."

"There are times," Slone said slowly, "when you have to take a stand for decency and square dealin' or never feel clean again."

"With that I agree heartily," Garcia said. "But you made enemies when you chose to champion the cause of the lowly and the oppressed."

"Yes," Slone agreed, "quite a few. That's why I pulled out of Mexico for a while. All the major domos in Sonora and Chihuahua were on the prod against me, to say nothin' of *el Presidente's rurales.* I didn't mind the hacienda foremen, and I could dodge the *rurales* who, after all, were just doin' what they were supposed to do. But a detachment of regular troops sent up from Mexico City were just too much. So I told the boys to scatter for a spell and rode north and worked over this way."

"You were what I suppose the authorities would call a filibuster, like William Walker, for instance?" said Garcia, with a smile.

"Sort of, I suppose," admitted Slone, "but I didn't have any political ambitions. I just hankered to get somethin' like a square deal for fellers who wasn't gettin' it. They called my *Dorados* outlaws, too, but none of 'em robbed anybody or stole any cows, or killed anybody who didn't have a killin' comin'."

"So I gathered from Pedro." Garcia nodded. "Well, that is in the past, and I hope you will see fit to stay with me for a long time."

"Maybe I will," Slone replied, but the old man detected a note of doubt in his voice, and sighed. Roberto Garcia knew what it meant to lead a lost cause, but he also knew it usually brought the leader only a nameless and sometimes dishonored grave.

"I certainly hope something will decide you to give over that life," he said.

"Well," Slone said, "I dunno."

The "something" was even at that moment on the way to the Cross G.

CHAPTER VI

Hand of Destiny

FOR several hours, Slone and Garcia sat and talked over range matters in general and the intricate and varied details pertaining to the operation of the great ranch. Finally Garcia stood up.

"I think I will retire," he said. "Old bones need rest. You will sleep in the room at the head of the stairs, to the right. I sleep down here, in the back of the house."

Saying good night, Slone mounted the stairs and saw two doors to the right of the stair head, set closely together. He opened the first and found himself in a large and comfortably furnished room with a wide window. Alfred slept at the far end of the hall. The other rooms, so far as Slone knew, were unoccupied. The hands slept in a commodious bunkhouse.

A room and a bed like this were luxury to Jed Slone, who for such a long stretch now had rolled up in his blankets under the stars. He slept dreamlessly and well.

In the morning Slone was introduced to the Cross G outfit, efficient looking young fellows for the most part, but with a few grizzled waddies among their number. Shortly after noon he and Garcia rode out together to look over the spread. Slone soon arrived at the conclusion that it was as fine a stretch of rangeland as he had ever seen. The grass was thick and tall. There were plenty of groves to provide shade, and an abundance of water. To the west were hills scored by deep, cool canyons, most of them grass-grown and watered.

"You don't have to worry much about droughts or blizzards here," he remarked to Garcia.

"It is fine land," agreed the old man. "Originally it was a Spanish grant to my grandfather. The validity of the grant was upheld by the courts after the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. As was that of the Fuentes family, my kinsmen. The Fu-

entes ranch is not so large as formerly. Amado Fuentes' father was considerable of a wastrel and sold some of his land to settle debts for gambling and other things. Amado, however, is a shrewd business man. I predict he will go far."

It was well after dark when they returned to the ranchhouse, but Pedro had left supper warm for them in the oven. They enjoyed a leisurely meal and Garcia ambled off to bed. Slone sat for some time in the living room, smoking and pondering over the unusual chain of events that had placed him where he was.

"Reckon I might as well give it a whirl, though," he decided. "Might as well coil my twine here for a spell and tie onto a stake. Garcia seems to be a regular old jigger. Still considerable of the *hidalgo*, even after a couple of generations up here. The old Spanish blood hangs on. Yes, reckon I'll stay on for a while."

Finally he pinched out his cigarette, extinguished the lamp and groped his way up the dark stairs. He fumbled about, found a knob and turned it. He shoved open the door—and halted in paralyzed astonishment.

The room was brightly lighted. Seated on the bed was a girl in a flimsy and most revealing silk nightgown. She was running a comb through her curly hair that was the color of a forest pool brimful of sunset. Her blue eyes widened, her red lips parted and the comb paused motionless amid the bright curls. She appeared considerably startled, but not at all frightened.

"I—I'm mighty sorry, ma'am," Slone stammered. "I—I must have opened the wrong door." Panic-stricken, he turned to flee, but the girl stopped him with a quick gesture of her little hand.

"Wait," she said in a low, soft and perfectly composed voice. "You must be Mr. Slone. Alfred and Pedro were telling me about—the new range boss."

"Th-that's right," Slone admitted, still clutching the door knob.

"I'm glad to see you," the girl said. "I want to thank you for what you did for Alfred."

"It wasn't much," Slone deprecated, getting something of a grip on himself.

"It saved his life, and that was a good deal," the girl replied. "Oh, don't look so scared! I'm not going to bite you, or scream for help. It was a natural mistake to make. The doors are set close together. I turned the wrong knob myself a couple of times, when I first came here."

SLONE breathed deep relief.

"Sure glad you feel that way about it, ma'am," he said. "Who are you? I didn't know there were any ladies in the house."

"There weren't, yesterday," the girl replied. "I just got back late this evening. I'm Gypsy Cameron, one of Don Roberto's cousins. I lived here. You see, I'm a Fuentes, at least a little bit of one. My mother was half Fuentes. That makes me a Fuentes, after a fashion, but the Fuentes good looks, of which Cousin Roberto has doubtless already spoken to you, passed me by. I resemble Dad's side of the house."

"Well," Slone said with conviction, "I reckon your dad must have been the sort of a feller folks turn to take a second look at, too."

She blushed a little at that, and dimpled. "Thank you, sir," she said. "You must have some Spanish blood, too—the way you pay compliments. No, I don't resemble the Fuentes in the least. The Fuentes women were always tall and stately and usually blonde. I'm not blonde and, as perhaps you've noticed, I'm just a half-pint for size."

"Been noticing," Slone replied with a vigor that caused her color to mount again.

"Yes, I guess there isn't much you haven't noticed with me in this costume," she agreed. The ripple of sound she made was suspiciously like a giggle.

"Poor Cousin Roberto!" she said. "He'd be shocked to death, poor old dear. He's a gentleman of the old school, if there ever was one. And I suppose Amado Fuentes would want to challenge you to a duel. Amado is the mirror of true chival-

ry. He believes in protecting women against all men, except himself."

"Well, that's a sort of new way to put it," Slone chuckled. "But I reckon most men are like that."

"I'm not so sure," Gypsy Cameron replied, suddenly grave. "Take yourself, for instance. I don't think any woman would ever need to be protected against you, no matter what the circumstances."

"And I'm not so sure that's exactly a compliment," Slone said, as he smiled reply.

"Perhaps not," she agreed, "but it's true. What the girl would need to be protected against would be—herself. Good night, Senor Slone!"

"Now what in blazes did she mean by *that?*" Slone wondered dazedly as he groped his way into his own room and lighted the lamp. "But, golly, she's a wonder! A regular little red-headed doll! The Fuentes women may be long on good looks, but for my money she can give 'em cards and spades and still win out. Uh-huh, pretty as a spotted pony. And I've a plumb notion she's got plenty under that curly red hair."

It was a perturbed young man who took a long time to go to sleep that night.

He met her again in the morning, at the breakfast table. She smiled demure acknowledgment to the introductions Garcia performed with stately formality. Slone's face was also composed. He bowed with a courtly grace that would have done credit to Don Roberto at his best. He was as unprepared as Garcia for what came next.

"Do you know, Cousin Robert," Gypsy said in perfectly casual tones, "I think he likes me better in my nightgown."

Garcia nearly leaped from his chair. "What—what!" he gasped.

Her face serious, but her wide eyes brimming with merriment, she recounted the adventure of the night before. Garcia shook his white head and threw out his hands in resigned bewilderment.

"You young people of this generation!" he said. "I cannot understand you. Now when I was young—"

His glance met Slone's quizzical gaze and he hesitated. A twinkle crept into his faded old eyes.

"I always knew *exactly* which room I was entering!" he finished severely.

"Maybe he did, too," remarked Gypsy.

The breakfast was a merry one. There was a pleased look in Garcia's eyes as he watched Slone and the girl leave the room together, her bright head coming barely to his shoulder. Under his mustache he murmured:

" 'There is a Divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will!' "

BEFORE the week was out, old Roberto Garcia had reason to congratulate himself on his latest acquisition. He quickly realized that Jed Slone had forgotten more about the cow business than any other of his hands knew. Slone took the reckless young Arizonians and the debonair *vaqueros* in hand and proceeded to teach them cattle handling, Texas style.

"Bustin' a cow wide open may look pretty," he told them. "But a cow with a broken neck or leg doesn't bring in any *dinero*. The boss is in business to make money, and I'm here to see he makes it. When you go into a herd, dab your loop onto the critter you're after and bring it to the brandin' fire. The men on the ground are expected to flank or bulldog anything up to an eighteen-month 'long yearlin'. You don't need a second roper for anything but a full-sized beef. And I don't want to see anybody headin' for a remuda with a whirlin' loop big as a barn that sets the whole bunch millin' and stampedin'. Slip up on 'em with your loop lyin' flat on the ground, like this—see?"

They saw. A swift underhand throw and the loop dropped over the neck of the horse Slone wanted. It was snaked out of the bunch without the least confusion. The other horses hardly bothered to stop grazing.

There were other things Slone taught them. They were splendid horsemen, marvelous ropers, but their spectacular stunts did not make for efficiency. Slone banished the stunts and got more work

done in a day than was formerly accomplished in three.

CHAPTER VII

A Grudge?

THE upheaval at the Cross G, however, was not altogether peaceful and orderly. The punchers growled and swore, mostly when Slone was not present. One big rider took a different view of the matter.

"I ain't used to havin' somebody tell me how to do my work," he told the range boss truculently.

"Get used to it then, and stay healthy," Slone replied in his quiet voice.

"I don't perpose to get used to it, and I aim to stay healthy just the same!" the cowboy bawled, doubling his big fists menacingly.

Without wasting time in argument, Slone hit him. The cowboy hit the ground, hard. He got up bellowing curses and asking for more. He got it. Ten seconds later he sat up on the ground, wiped the blood from his face and grinned.

"I'm used to it," he said briefly as he got to his feet.

The Cross G hands quickly learned to respect Slone, next to admire him, and finally to like him whole-heartedly.

"He's a whizzer," one of the older waddies told Garcia, something more than a week after Slone took charge. "There ain't one of our young hellions who wouldn't fight for him at the drop of a hat. You know big Bill Jackson, the one Slone trimmed proper the first of last week? You sent Bill and Pete Worthington to Tombstone for some stuff yesterday. They stopped off at the Alhambra for a drink before headin' home. Pete told me about it. They were talkin' with some fellers in there and Bill was tellin' 'em about what a prime jigger Slone is. Well, one of them fellers, a sort of unsavory specimen—I think he's kind of tied up the Galeyville bunch—he 'lows that Slone is just a owlhoot that got run out of Mexico. Bill Jackson didn't say a word. He just picked up a bottle and busted that feller's head wide open with it. Feller didn't come to for half an hour. And the way the rest of the bunch latigoed their jaws was somethin' worth lookin' at. Uh-huh, Jed Slone is sure one prime man-tamer."

After the puncher had departed, chuckling, Gypsy Cameron remarked pensively from a corner of the veranda:

"Cousin Roberto, I wonder how he is with women?"

It was big Bill Jackson who brought some serious news to Slone.

"Boss," he said, "we're losin' cows."

"Sure about it?" Slone asked.

"Plumb positive," Jackson insisted. "You know it's my chore to keep tally, me and Pete Worthington. We check careful as we can, and I tell you we're losin' em. That dod-blasted Galeyville outfit!"

Slone looked thoughtful. "I'm not so sure the Galeyville bunch is to blame," he replied.

"You're not?" Jackson said incredulously. "Why?"

"I've been checkin' up on Brocius and his bunch since I've been here," Slone explained. "He's not a small operator. At first he was. He lifted cows from small and scattered spreads. He ran off horses from army posts, and so on. But that was small pickings. It didn't take long for a hellion as smart as he is to realize that the big field for his operations was Mexico. Down in Sonora and Chihuahua are millions of longhorns, half-wild and scattered over estates almost as big as all Arizona. There are *haciendados* down there who couldn't tell you within a hundred thousand head how many cows they own."

"Kind of good pickin's for a bunch like Brocius' outfit," said Bill Jackson, grinning.

"Yeah, and they can pick up a thousand beef steers at one swoop, run 'em across the Line and sell 'em here at a good profit. They take chances, of course. Plenty of salty jiggers down there, and the *rurales* are somethin' to reckon with. But still it's

safer than wideloopin' cows up here. Brocius knows this outfit. He knows its riders are tough men and capable men. Why should he take a greater chance than he would below the Line for a lot less profit? Brocius is no cheap horse thief or brush-poppin' widelooper. He's big business."

JACKSON rubbed his bristly head and agreed that there might be somethin' to what Slone said.

"Then who in blazes is doin' it?" he demanded.

"That's for us to find out," Slone replied grimly. "Now I want to check with you. Admittin' that somebody is liftin' our cows, how would they get 'em out of the neighborhood?"

"By way of the Lobo Trail across the east shoulder of the Huachucas," Jackson instantly replied. "There ain't no other way. Farther east they'd have to pass over Amado Fuentes' holdin's, and they'd be spotted for sure."

"So if we keep tabs on the Lobo Trail we should drop a loop on 'em sooner or later," Slone said.

"Sure," Jackson agreed.

"Then," Slone said, "that's your chore from now on. You can take whoever you want along with you, as many as you want. I'm leavin' it to you to handle. Go to it, feller."

Jackson grinned delightedly. Slone shrewdly divined that Jackson would be pleased by having authority delegated to him, and would be the more alert and resourceful in consequence. And he had faith in the big fellow's ability. He made no suggestions as to details, leaving Jackson to work them out in accordance with his own judgment.

He contented himself by remarking, "I'll keep my eyes open, too, and chances are I'll be around to lend you a hand if you should happen to need it."

"We won't," Jackson promised grimly. "Just let me line sights with them sidewinders!"

He fell silent a moment, then abruptly he proffered a comment that heightened Slone's opinion of the big fellow's shrewdness.

"Ever stop to think, Boss," he said slowly, "that there's one reason why Brocius might be back of this business, even though he might lose money on the deal? He don't like you much, from what I hear. He might be payin' off a grudge. He knows, of course, that you're in charge here now, and anything that goes wrong reflects on you. Also he might be layin' a little trap for you. "

"I've thought of that," Slone admitted, "and there may be somethin' to it."

"Brocius is smart," said Jackson. "He'll be cookin' up a mess for you sooner or later, and don't forget it."

Smiling grimly as the big cowboy sauntered away, Jed Slone thought that it might well be that Bill Jackson could prove to be a prophet with honor even in his own land.

* * * * *

The Benson stage, rolling northwest from Tombstone, was hours late. A heavy storm had washed out the road in places, snapped big branches from trees and scattered them, with an occasional fallen trunk, across the track. Time after time old Bill Phillips, the driver, and Bob Porter, the shotgun guard, had to descend from the high seat and sweat and swear until the trail was cleared enough to let the clumsy vehicle pass.

Negotiating the washouts was ticklish business, with an upset momentarily threatening. Once they had to carry boulders for a hundred yards and fill in a hole in which a wheel would certainly have bogged down.

It was two o'clock in the morning and five miles still to go when the coach swayed and jolted across a wide dry wash that was now more of a rock-strewn mudhole. On the far side of the wash was a steep upgrade that sweated the horses and reduced the coach's speed to a crawl.

Both Phillips and Porter were nervous and ill-at-ease. For inside the locked coach was treasure shipment of forty

thousand dollars in gold, a transfer from a Tombstone bank. Nobody but those two and trusted bank officials were supposed to know the shipment was there. But the fact that *they* knew it was enough to render driver and guard more than a little jumpy.

"Not quite five miles more to go," grunted Porter as the horses toiled up the sag. "I'll be plumb happy when we roll into Benson."

"You can make that double," growled Phillips. "Never had such a trip. And we ain't out of the woods yet. Lots of things can happen in five miles."

"Oh, shut up!" snorted Porter. "Ain't it bad enough without you croakin'? Hell

DOUBLE HARNESS

By PECOS PETE

When a Western hombre marries,
It's generally allowed,
Chances are he won't be henpecked,
But he'll certainly be cowed.

and blazes! There's another one down—a big one! We'll have a beaut of a time movin' that one."

PHILLIPS added his curses to the guard's. Across the trail lay a hefty tree trunk. Still swearing, he jerked the horses to a halt and climbed down. Porter followed. They approached with no hopeful countenances for it was a husky tree with a welter of wide-spreading branches tangled amid the growth that edged the trail. And just as they reached it, five masked men stepped from the chaparral. A harsh voice rang out:

"Elevate!"

Porter had left his shotgun leaning against the seat. Instinctively his hand whipped to his side, where his heavy Colt hung.

The foremost of the holdup men shot him. He fell without a sound, to lie sprawled in the mud. Old Phillips elevated, and elevated fast, his face a dirty gray, his eyes fairly starting from his head.

"That's better," growled the leader of the owlhoots, in a voice muffled by his mask. "Keep 'em that way, or you'll get it, too. All right, boys, bust that lock and haul out the stuff. Step lively. Somebody might be ridin' out from Benson, lookin' for this shebang."

The silent quartette stepped forward, the moonlight glinting on the bright yellow shirts they wore. The tall leader moved a little to one side, his eyes never leaving Phillips. The old driver, scared as he was, took note of the man's size and shape. Of his face he could see nothing, but chestnut hair showed under his hat-brim.

"Looked sort of curly to me, but I couldn't be sure," Phillips said later, when asked about it.

One of the owlhoots produced a heavy hammer. With it he quickly smashed the lock and opened the coach door. Two more grunted with the weight of the padlocked iron strong-box they hauled out. A few more hammer blows and the lid was lifted.

"It's here, all right, Boss," one of the men called gruffly.

"Pack it over to the horses and fill the pouches," the tall leader ordered. While his followers obeyed he kept his gun trained on the driver.

Keen-eyed old Phillips noted that one of the men carrying the box had the first two fingers of his left hand missing.

"All right, you, turn around," the leader ordered Phillips when his men came back to the trail.

Deftly he plucked the driver's gun from its sheath and slipped it under his own belt. Another removed the Colt from

Porter's body, while still another got the shotgun.

"Jerk that log around so he can pass," the leader directed. When the tree trunk was swung aside, Phillips saw that it had not been uprooted by the storm but had been cut.

"All right, old-timer, up with you," ordered the leader. "Head for town and keep goin'. Might be a good idea not to look back, too."

Phillips obeyed orders. He did not look back until he was over the lip of the rise and speeding down the far side.

CHAPTER VIII

Accounted For

LATE the next afternoon, Sheriff Behan rode up to the Cross G ranchhouse with a posse that numbered in its ranks the two McLowerys, Frank Stillwell, Pete Spence and other known associates of Curly Bill Brocius. Garcia greeted them courteously and invited them to dismount and "cool their saddles." They grouped together on the veranda, casting suspicious glances in every direction.

"Something I can do for you, Sheriff?" asked Garcia.

"Reckon you can," replied the sheriff. Briefly he told of the robbery and killing on the Benson road. He concluded: "And we'd sort of like to speak to that new range boss of yours."

"Jed Slone?" replied Garcia. "He should be riding in shortly. "He's down on the south pasture, I believe. Why do you wish to talk to Slone?"

"Well," the sheriff replied grimly, "Bill Phillips said the feller who gave the orders and shot Porter was a big tall jigger with black hair. And he said the bunch with him were wearin' yellow shirts. Everybody knows that Slone's *Dorados* down in Mexico wore yellow shirts and sometimes when he was on the prod his hair was black as an Apache's. So we'd like to have a word with Slone."

"Nothing will ever convince me that Jed Slone had anything to do with such an outrage," old Roberto declared vehemently.

"Maybe not," replied the sheriff, "but just the same we aim to have a few words with him."

Gypsy Cameron, who was sitting at the far end of the veranda, a book in her lap, spoke for the first time since the posse's arrival.

"What time did you say the robbery took place, Sheriff?" she asked.

"Phillips thought it was about two o'clock in the mornin'," the sheriff told her.

"Well, then," Gypsy said, "Jed Slone certainly didn't have anything to do with it."

"How do you know?" demanded Behan.

"Because," Gypsy calmly told him, "at two o'clock last night, Jed Slone was with me."

"With you?" exclaimed Behan. "At two o'clock in the mornin'?"

"Yes." Gypsy glared at him. "In my room! What of it?"

"Why—why, nothin', ma'am, nothin'," gulped the sheriff. He stared at her, shook his head in a bewildered way and turned to his possemen. "All right, boys. We might as well be ridin'. No sense in hangin' around wastin' time here to talk to Slone. Not with the alibi he's got!"

After the frustrated sheriff and his disgruntled men had departed, Roberto Garcia turned to his youthful cousin.

"*Cara mia,*" he said, "of course we both know that Jed Slone had nothing to do with that robbery and killing, but I don't believe he was in your room."

"No," Gypsy admitted," he wasn't. He was in his own room. He got in late and I heard him moving around. But," she added cheerfully, "I guess he could have been in mine if he'd wanted to."

When Jed Slone came in and listened to the story Garcia had to tell him, he was deeply thoughtful.

"And the driver said the fellers wore yellow shirts, eh?" he commented, at its

conclusion. "And they left the driver alive to take the news to town. In other words, advertised who they were, lettin' it be supposed it was me and my bunch from below the Line that pulled the chore. But, also, they wore masks. That mean anything to you, suh?"

"I understand you," Garcia replied. "Yes, it looks as if somebody was trying to direct suspicion toward you."

"Exactly." Slone nodded.

"But," protested Garcia, "such evidence would never stand up in court."

"Reckon not," Slone agreed. "Believe, though, you said there were quite a few gents in that posse who are known to be—well, friendly with Curly Bill Brocius. Ever hear of *la ley de fuga?*"

"You mean killed while attempting to escape? But Behan would never stand for anything like that, I am sure!"

SLONE nodded slowly.

"No, I don't think he would," he agreed. "But it wouldn't be so hard for that bunch to get him out of the way for a few minutes, on some pretext or other. And then, *los muertos no hablan!*"

"*Si,*" translated Garcia, " 'dead men do not talk'."

"That's the answer," said Slone. "Sheriff Behan might suspect something wasn't just right, but he couldn't prove a thing. Not that he'd try any too hard, maybe. I reckon he's sort of beholden to the Brocius bunch. They control votes, and if Wyatt Earp runs against Behan for sheriff, he'll need all he can get on election day. Yes, I figure the little lady saved my bacon, all right." He looked around at the little girl. "But, Gypsy, why didn't you just tell them you heard me movin' around in my room. I'm afraid you sort of shocked the sheriff. He's a family man."

Miss Cameron's reaction could only be dignified as a sniff.

"That's the sort of stupid question to be expected from a man," she said. "Suppose I told the sheriff I knew you were home because I heard you moving about? Do you suppose somebody wouldn't have asked how I knew it was you moving about? And then what could I have said? I hoped to shock the sheriff a little anyhow, enough maybe to throw him off-balance so he couldn't put up an argument. It worked."

"Yes, I reckon it did," Slone conceded. "Fast thinkin', almighty fast thinkin'."

"You were exactly right in what you told Cousin Roberto," Gypsy said. "Those men hate you. I could read it in their eyes. They were all set to kill you, and if they had ever taken you with them they would have managed to do it before you reached Tombstone. I realized that and did what I could to prevent it. And it's one lie that I don't think will ever trouble my conscience much. . . ."

Amado Fuentes was a frequent visitor to the Cross G ranchhouse. Although he always spent some time with Alfred, who was slowly mending, he made a point of seeking Gypsy Cameron's company. He favored Slone with an aloof courtesy.

"Doesn't want me to forget I'm a hired hand, I reckon," Slone remarked amusedly to Bill Jackson.

The big puncher snorted angrily. "Uppity squirt!" he growled. "He's that way with most everybody. I don't like him. He's a man, though. A plumb bearcat in a ruckus and chain lightnin' on the draw. I don't believe he's scared of anything that walks, crawls or flies. A hard man to go up against. And smart. Don't drink to amount to anything. Likes cards and plays a lot, usually in the Oriental when he's in Tombstone. Seems to sort of hang around with the Earps. Wants Wyatt to run for sheriff, but I don't think Wyatt will do it. Fuentes says Johnny Behan is too darn friendly with the Brocius outfit."

A few days later Slone understood what Jackson meant when he said Amado Fuentes liked cards. He was in Tombstone attending to some ranch business and toward evening dropped into the Oriental for a drink and something to eat. Fuentes was at a poker table playing with several ranch and mine owners, including the famous Richard Gird, co-discoverer with

Ed Schieffelin of the Tombstone silver ledges. There was also a lean, hard-faced individual in the game whom Slone decided was a professional gambler.

But it was Amado Fuentes who commanded his attention.

Fuentes' unbelievably handsome face was beaded with sweat. His golden hair clung damply to his temples. His eyes were glowing and looked black in a face that was several degrees paler than normal. His hands shook slightly as he dealt the cards.

"Gamblin' fever," mused Slone. "And he's got it bad. Wouldn't have believed he had it in him to show any feelin'. But he's showin' it now. Come to think of it, Roberto Garcia mentioned this feller's dad was considerable of a gambler and lost a lot at cards. Fuentes looks like a loser, too. That sort usually is. Can't quit when he's ahead. Has to hang on till the last dog's dead, and new blood movin' into the game cleans him. Well, reckon he can afford it."

IT WAS while Slone was enjoying a leisurely cigarette after eating that he witnessed something which recalled to him Jackson's remark about Fuentes being chain lightning on the draw. Also the revelation that cards and cards only affected the ranch owner's steel nerves.

"That's Jim Crane, the feller in black, playin' poker in the big game over there," a sociable waiter had remarked as Slone sat watching the play while his food was being prepared. "Crane's almighty smart with the pasteboards. He don't really belong in that game. The other fellers are respectable. Crane's been spoke of more'n once in connection with some funny happenin's. He's plumb bad, too. Fast gunhand and a dead shot."

Slone, watching idly, suddenly became aware that something was amiss at the poker table. Amado Fuentes was leaning across the table, his eyes fixed on the face of the gambler, Jim Crane. He spoke, his voice low, but clear and carrying, his words evenly spaced.

"Crane," he said, "you lie. You pulled that card from the bottom and you know it. Now get out of this game!"

The gambler's face burned fiery red. He leaped to his feet with a roar of anger.

"Why, you damned miserable half-breed!" he bellowed. "Here's where you get what you're askin' for!"

His hand streaked to his belt.

Amado Fuentes did not even rise to his feet. His white hand blurred across his chest to his shoulder holster. The hanging lamps danced to the boom of a shot. With a gasping yell, Jim Crane reeled backward and fell, to lie groaning and retching, blood spurting from his bullet-smashed shoulder. Even as Wyatt Earp's lionlike roar boomed from the bar and Doc Holliday flipped his shotgun from its loop and to his shoulder, Amado Fuentes sheathed his still smoking gun, flicked a snowy handkerchief from his breast pocket and carefully wiped a slight powder stain from his gun hand.

He did not bother to look once at the fallen man.

"I've got to get that cylinder tightened a mite," he remarked in pleasantly conversational tones. "Spurts smoke a little when she goes off."

He returned the handkerchief to his pocket and patted it into place. And, Slone noticed, the hands that had shaken while dealing cards were now rock-steady.

"I believe it's your deal, Gird," said Fuentes, passing the cards to the mine owner.

Wyatt Earp's cold gaze rested on Fuentes a moment. Then he shrugged and turned back to the bar. Doc Holliday chuckled, and slipped his shotgun back into its loop. Jim Crane was carried out to be patched up. A swamper with bucket and mop scrubbed the blood stains from the floor. The poker game was resumed as if nothing had happened.

Slone eyed Fuentes thoughtfully for a moment, pinched out his cigarette, and left the saloon.

He walked down the noisy street, seeing nothing but thinking hard. "Kinda quick-tempered hombre," he said.

CHAPTER IX

Curly Bill

JED SLONE arrived at the spread the following afternoon, to find Bill Jackson in a bad temper.

"They're still takin' 'em," the big puncher declared the moment Slone dismounted. "How, I don't know. We've been keepin' tabs on the Lobo Trail day and night and we haven't seen a thing."

"Which means," decided Slone, "that there must be another way out."

"Looks like it," Jackson admitted, "but where in hell is it? I never heard tell of one and I been around this ranch for quite a spell. I know every inch of this country for miles!"

Slone nodded, but he did not attach much weight to Bill Jackson's insistence. He knew that cowhands are not given to riding around in the hills. He doubted if Jackson had ever been out of the valley other than by way of the well-traveled trails.

"Reckon it's up to us to find out," he said. "One thing is sure—they must have a good market lined up. You can't go pitching branded stock around just anywhere."

"Them contractors who supply the San Carlos and other Injun reservations with beef will buy anything so long as they figure they can get away with it," growled Jackson. "And the same goes for slaughter-houses. There ain't no brand on a side of meat. And there are buyers who'll run a herd off a ways, then ship it East. If they get spotted, they got bills of sale to show they bought the cows from somebody or other, and how were they to know they was rustled? Plenty of markets if you know where they are."

Slone was forced to admit the truth of this. Trying to trace a herd once it was off its home range was a pretty hopeless task.

"We've got to find their way out," he repeated.

"I met one of Fuentes' breeds yesterday and had a pow-wow with him," said Jackson. "They're losin' down there, too. Plenty, the jigger said, and they ain't been able to get a line on the hellions. Of course it's easier to run stock off Fuentes' south pastures. It's a straight shoot to the Line from there. They don't have to cross the Huachucas."

"And you don't think it's possible for our cows to be run across Fuentes' holdin's?" Slone asked.

Jackson shook his head decidedly. "They might slip a bunch through now and then," he replied, "but not enough to account for what we're losin'. Couldn't do it in the daytime, and Fuentes' hands are patrollin' at night, same as we are. They'd get spotted sure. Nope, I'm scared that's out."

"Then," Slone repeated, "it's certainly up to us to find out how they do it. I think I'll do a little ridin' over to the west and south."

"And I think," said Jackson, "that you'd better keep your eyes wide open while you're doin' it. You've got a bad bunch on your tail, Boss, and they'll be lookin' for a chance. Drygulchin' is just their dish."

As Slone rode away, for some reason—perhaps Jackson's uneasiness was the cause—his mind was chiefly occupied with thoughts of Curly Bill Brocius and his gang, and of their depredations. Particularly he recalled the raiding of a smuggler train and the killing of nineteen Mexicans in a gloomy gorge of dry bones. Slone would never forget any of the grisly details of the Skeleton Canyon drygulching, perhaps the best known and most brutal of the Brocius gang's forays.

As the story was told to Slone by old Pedro, the Cross G Yaqui cook, Don Miguel Garcia—no relation to Don Roberto—was a smuggler, a gay, handsome fellow with brains and courage. His specialty was Mexican silver 'dobe dollars. These he slipped across the Line, avoiding the customs dues. With them he purchased goods from Arizona merchants. These much wanted goods, also free of tax, he

disposed of below the Line at fancy profits. So he made money both coming and going.

His trade, though outside the law, was looked upon with equanimity. Both Mexicans and frontier Arizonians resented the tribute levied by their respective governments and rather admired anybody with the ability to circumvent such high-handed machinations. So Don Miguel was popular on both sides of the Border. He was generous, a good spender, a genial host and entertainer.

SKELETON CANYON lay in the wildest part of the Peloncilla Mountains, winding from the Animas Valley in New Mexico to the San Bernardino Valley in Arizona. It was the scene of many a desperate affair and on that sunny day when Don Miguel and his band rode through it, bound for the vicinity of Tucson, it was already a veritable charnel house. Bones and skulls gleamed from every thicket and bunch of grass and breathed an aura of death over the rocky gorge.

Behind Don Miguel, who rode in the van with ready rifle and six-gun, came a long line of lithe Andalusian mules, each half-hidden beneath a great rawhide pack stuffed with 'dobe dollars.

Along the flanks of the train rode swarthy, hard-faced, watchful men. These were the outriders who guarded the precious cargo. They were ready for anything and were old hands at the business.

The plodding train neared a weird rock formation of tall spires known as the Devil's Kitchen and not far from the San Bernardino mouth of the canyon. The canyon wall was low there, its broken rim clothed with a tangle of chaparral.

As the smuggler train rounded the bend just east of the Devil's Kitchen, a sound of loud and merry whistling struck their ears. They tensed to alertness as they spotted a single rider pacing his horse slowly toward them from the west. The horseman flung up his hand with a whoop of greeting.

His broad, dark face beneath his shock of bushy, curly hair, was wreathed in smiles. He had all the appearance of a jolly, carefree cowhand combing the brakes and canyons for strays. As such, he quickly announced himself. While the outriders watched him with suspicious eyes, he reined in beside Don Miguel and pulled a bottle from his pocket.

"Have a snort with me, feller," he invited with an infectious chuckle. "Never liked to drink alone, and I'm pow'ful dry. Been huntin' out cows in this darn hole all day. Lonesome work, but got to be done."

His good humor and hospitality were hard to resist. Don Miguel accepted a drink and smacked his lips over the excellence of the liquor. His men relaxed with grins and the "cowboy" took a huge snort and tossed the still half-full flask to the nearest rider, who caught it deftly and instinctively raised it to his lips. None noticed the swift glance the cowboy cast toward the dark and silent canyon rim, or the almost imperceptible nod of his head. That was Curly Bill Brocius' signal to his hidden men to make ready.

"Got to be goin'," said Curly Bill. "Some of them damn strays is apt to be clean over in the Animas Valley, and if I don't round 'em up, the Old Man will r'ar."

With a gay wave of his hand he rode on, nodding to each man as he passed.

"Good luck, fellers," he called back as he reached the rear end of the train. "Have fun in Tucson."

The smugglers waved and shouted answers, grinning with anticipation. They were still grinning when Curly Bill flung his hand high into the air, and death struck them. The canyon rim literally spouted flame and smoke. The rock walls trembled to the thunder of the reports. Curly Bill whirled his horse, his dark face that of the devil, both six-shooters blazing.

The Mexicans never had a chance. Don Miguel went down at the first volley. His men died fighting, firing wildly at unseen foes. By twos and threes they fell, screaming, calling on the saints, writhing in agony as the heavy slugs tore through their bodies. No wounded were spared.

Only one of the smugglers escaped, a

mere boy, whose terrified horse whirled about and tore back through the canyon. The mules were stampeding in every direction and got into the line of Brocius' fire. He cut leaves from the bushes over the boy's head, showered him with twigs and his horse with stone splinters. But no bullet reached its mark. The fugitive whisked around the bend and disappeared. Pursuit was out of the question. Besides, the owlhoots had other things to attend to.

QUICKLY the mules were rounded up. From the pack sacks was taken more than seventy-five thousand dollars in Mexican silver.

The escape of the Mexican youth was the only unsatisfactory incident. It worried Curly Bill and his men, for they knew the story of the outrage would now be carried back to the land of *mañana*. How many faces had the young Mexican recognized when the outlaws rose up from the chaparral on the canyon rim to take surer aim?

In fact, he had noted and recognized only one, a ferocious looking old man with a long white beard—Old Man Clanton. That face was etched indelibly on the tablets of his memory. And Clanton was known as Curly Bill's right bower.

"Yes, one escaped," repeated old Pedro, as he concluded his story. "He lost three brothers and he does not forget. The outlaws will pay for blood with blood."

Slone nodded sober agreement. That was also his opinion.

It was also Curly Bill's opinion, a belief which had been strengthened by the arrival of Jed Slone in Tombstone.

"That damned kid who got away from the canyon took the yarn to Slone and his infernal *Dorados*," Curly Bill declared to his worried owlhoots, in his stronghold of Galeyville. "Why else would he be up here? One thing is sure—Slone's got to be got out of the way. I don't give a hoot about the *Dorados* or any other Mex riders, if he ain't along to lead 'em and tell 'em what to do. Charley, Hughes, Thomas,

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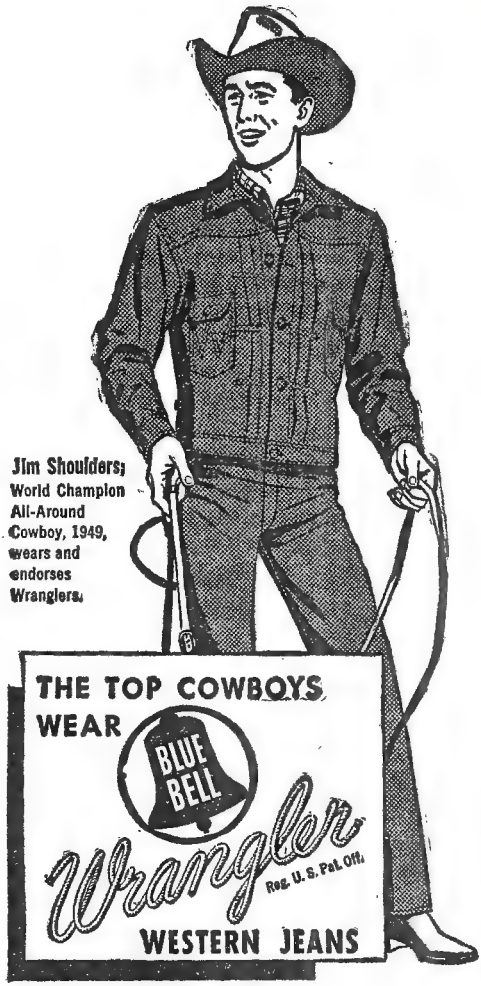

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it's your chore. See you don't slip up on it, like them bunglers did by the spring over in the San Pedro when he was on his way home from Tombstone. You were *there that day, Gauze. I thought you'd do* a better job."

"I thought so, too," Gauze, a burly, red-faced individual with a cruel slit of a mouth, growled reply. "And I got a slug through my ribs for bein' there to think at all. And Pancho got it dead center. That big hellion is plumb pizen. We was every one under cover when he come ridin' along. Nobody could have seen us from the trail. But he knew we was there and was all set and ready."

There was a contemplative look in Brocius' black eyes as he thoughtfully replied, "Just the same, you fellers are handed a chore, and I don't want any slip-ups or alibis."

Though fully aware that he was riding with danger at his stirrup, and that Bill Jackson was right in urging caution, Jed Slone was not satisfied to let the matter of the missing cattle rest. Not until he had explored every possibility of an outlet for the rustlers.

He took to riding the slopes of the Huachucas and the hills to the north of the range. If the rustlers had a secret way out of the valley, it was certainly well-hidden. Still he was positive that the stolen cattle could not go north or east. They would be forced to pass over more populous sections where cowhands continually rode, and a herd would attract attention.

"There's a way out we don't know about," he insisted to Bill Jackson each time he rode wearily back to Cross G headquarters, with no results. "I'll find it!"

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CHAPTER X

Officer of the Law

YOUNG Alfred Cushman, after several weeks in bed, had recovered enough to be able to spend the days in a chair on the veranda. One evening he and Slone were sitting talking together when Amado Fuentes rode up. To Slone's surprise, Cushman's eyes hardened at sight of his handsome cousin and his mouth became tight. When Fuentes transferred his attentions to Gypsy Cameron at the other side of the veranda, the glance Cushman bent on him was distinctly hostile.

"Darned if I don't believe the kid's jealous of Amado," Slone told himself. "Well, can't say as I blame him. Fuentes is sure one fine-looking jigger, and Gypsy is worth any man being jealous over."

Slone knew that Roberto Garcia had raised Cushman and the girl together, since they were little more than children, and there was undoubtedly a strong bond of affection between them.

Not being burdened with vanity, Slone did not stop to consider that Cushman had never shown any resentment when he, Slone, spent time in Gypsy's company. Instead, there was always a pleased expression in his eyes when the two talked together and appeared to be on the best of terms. In fact, Alfred and old Roberto would often chuckle and exchange knowing glances, as if they shared a particularly pleasing secret.

But now the young man's handsome face was bleak, his eyes hard and resentful. Slone shook his head and tried to interest Alfred Cushman in something else, with scant success.

After Fuentes finally had departed, Slone picked Alfred up, chair and all, and carried him upstairs to his room, although Alfred protested he could walk and was tired of being treated like a baby.

"Al," Slone asked, after the door was closed, "what's the matter with you and

Amado Fuentes? You acted like you were plumb on the prod against him, this evenin'."

Cushman shrugged his shoulders. "I don't like him, and I never did," he replied. "He gambles all the time and he's plumb notorious for his affairs with women. If Gypsy marries him, like he wants her to do, he'll break her heart. I think a hell of a lot of Gypsy and wouldn't want anything bad to happen to her. I'm mighty glad you showed up here when you did. I'm not so worried about Gypsy as I used to be."

Slone stared at him in bewilderment. "What in blazes do you mean by that—me showing up when I did?" he asked.

Alfred smiled. "Only that I think you'll give Amado a run for his money," he said.

"You're loco," Slone said. "She wouldn't look at me twice."

Alfred laughed aloud. He had inherited the romantic temperament of his Spanish forebears, and at times expressed himself in their flowery mode of speech.

"Rightly it is said, the eyes of love are blind," he remarked. "I believe it is a true saying." Then abruptly dropping back into cowland vernacular: "Stop ridin' in circles, Jed. You're sweet on her and she's sweet on you. So get busy and stop givin' Amado a chance to beat your time. I tell you he's got a way with him. And," he added out of the vast experience, knowledge and self assurance of nineteen, "you never can tell about a woman. Twirl your twine, feller, and don't waste your loop."

Slone departed from this interview in a somewhat chaotic frame of mind. Abruptly he realized that Alfred Cushman was right in one particular. He was "sweet" on Gypsy Cameron. He wanted her more than anything else in the world. But he placed little faith in young Alfred's interpretation of Gypsy's feeling in the matter. After all, what had he, Slone, to offer that Amado Fuentes couldn't trump with half a hand?

"Just about the finest-looking jigger I ever laid eyes on," he told himself. "A big ranch owner and, as Al said, he's got a way with him. Couldn't blame any girl for falling for him, hard."

All of which was proof that, despite his extra ten years of living, Jed Slone had acquired just about as much real understanding of women as had young Al in his august nineteen summers. . . .

A FEW days later, when Slone rode up to the ranchhouse, a tall blond man was sitting on the veranda, smoking.

"Howdy, Slone," said Wyatt Earp. "Been waitin' for you. Want to have a little talk with you."

"You come to pack me off to jail, too?" Slone smiled.

"Nope," Earp said, and smiled in return. "Wouldn't know what to do with you when I got you there. But I do want to talk business and ask a bit of help."

"It's like this," said Earp. "As you may know, I'm a deputy United States marshal. Well, that gold shipment that was lifted on the Benson Road the other night was an interstate shipment, bound for California. That made the robbery a crime against the Federal Government, and comes within my jurisdiction. Naturally I'm interested. And I've found out somethin' I consider important."

He paused to accept a cigarette Slone had rolled. Slone made no comment.

"Old Bill Phillips, the driver of the stage," Earp resumed, "has a sharp pair of eyes. He noticed that one of the robbers who was helpin' haul the treasure box out of the coach had two fingers missin' from his left hand. One of the little slips the owlhoot breed always make. Covered up their faces but forgot about that jigger's crippled hand. When Phillips told about it, right off I realized I know that feller. He's a breed called Three-Finger Jack Robles. A hard character, although he's never been in trouble before, exceptin' fights, so far as I've been able to learn. He's a cowhand and has ridden for several spreads hereabouts. He has a brother named Mirandos Robles who is a dealer in firewood and lives in Contention. Mirandos has a wood ranch in Frenchy's Canyon near Mescal Springs in the Whetstone

Mountains. His usual procedure is to drive from Contention to the Whetstones in one day, sleep at his camp that night and return to Contention the next day with a load of wood."

Earp paused again, this time to relight his cigarette which had gone out.

"I got to thinking," he went on then. "Got to thinking that it was likely that Mirandos Robles might be keepin' in touch with his brother. Old Phillips did a heap of talkin' after the robbery and the word got around that one of the fellers was short a couple of fingers. After that I never saw hide or hair of Three-finger Jack in Tombstone, and haven't been able to locate him anywhere. Which made me figure he's hidin' out. Men who hide out have to eat.

"So I figure maybe his brother Mirandos was gettin' chuck to Three-finger. So I had Mirandos watched day and night by a couple of fellers I can trust. They reported to me that on each trip out of town, Mirandos packed several gunnysacks full of food with him, a lot more than he could possibly eat himself. Looks to me like he's packin' chuck to his brother and the other hellions who made up that bunch. And that they're holed up somewheres in Frenchy's Canyon, a plumb wild and desolate section."

"I see." Slone nodded. "And you figure to go after them?"

"That's right." Wyatt Earp also nodded. "But I got to move careful. Every move I make is watched. If I rode out of Tombstone with a posse and headed for the Whetstones, somebody would be mighty apt to get to Frenchy's Canyon first. Easy to telegraph the word to Contention and send some jigger hightailin' for the hills. You can't even move a bunch of men out of Tombstone at night without somebody knowin' it. So I rode out by myself in broad daylight and headed down here, almost in the other direction from the Whetstones. Chances are I was followed for a ways, at that. But I don't think I wore a tail when I got here."

He paused a moment and Slone eyed the famous marshal with interest, noting his long, impassive face of pronounced pallor, his deep-set, blue-gray eyes, his tawny drooping mustache over a firm mouth and massive chin. Wyatt Earp's hair was as yellow as a lion's mane and his voice was a booming lionlike brool. Lionlike, too, was the slow, slithery ease of his movements and his gaunt, heavy-boned loose-limbed frame. A man to reckon with, and to depend on.

"So that brings me down to business," said the marshal. "I need about three men to ride with me to the Whetstones as a posse. I figure there's five—maybe one or two more in that hole-up—so three men with me should be enough. I'd like for you to be one of the men, and I got a proposition for you. I've had a talk with Mr. C. P. Dade, United States Marshal of Arizona. He has empowered me to offer you a deputy marshalship as an assistant to me. What do you say?"

JED SLOAN grinned broadly. "Considerable of a compliment, I'd say," he declared, "but I happen to be signed up with Roberto Garcia for a spell."

"That needn't matter," said Earp. "You wouldn't be givin' up your job with Garcia, and you wouldn't be on active duty all the time; only when I happened to need you. And the word wouldn't be passed around. You'd act as an undercover man. The prestige behind the job, and the authority, might come in handy some time."

"Well," conceded Slone, "I reckon I could do worse."

"All right then," said Earp. "Here's your badge. Stow it away out of sight. And here's your commission already filled out and signed by Marshal Dade. You see, I sort of counted on you. Hold up your right hand."

A few rumbled words and Jed Slone was a law officer.

"And I figure I can get the other two men you need for the ride to the Whetstones," he told Earp. "That is, if it's all right with Garcia. He should be showing within an hour or so. Bill Jackson and Pete Worthington will be r'arin' to go. They're always cravin' excitement and will jump at the chance of a shindig."

"Don't think we will have any trouble gettin' Garcia's consent," said the marshal. "He's a right old jigger and always ready to go along with the law."

Slone was thoughtfully silent for a moment. "By the way," he said at length, "is Robles one of the Galeyville bunch?"

Wyatt Earp shook his head. "No," he said definitely. "I don't think he is. Why?"

"Because," Slone said slowly, "the bunch that robbed the stage were wearin' yellow shirts, much the same as my *Dorados* wore down below the line. Mexicans are strong for uniforms, you know. One of the boys suggested it and the rest plumb fell for the notion. That's how come they were known as the *Dorados*—golden men. It looked like somebody was deliberately trying to throw suspicion on me, the way I figure it, and I can't think of anybody up here who would want to do that except Brocius and his bunch."

"Interestin'," said Earp. "But I'm plumb positive Robles don't belong to Brocius' outfit. He's half Mexican, and Brocius hasn't got any use for Mexicans."

Slone nodded, and remained thoughtful. Suddenly Wyatt Earp voiced a question.

"Slone," he said, "how did you happen to be riding with the *Dorados?*"

"It's considerable of a yarn," Slone replied, "but if you'd like to hear it—"

"I sure would," Earp replied. In silence and interest he listened to Slone's story.

CHAPTER XI

The Devil's Roundup

WHISTLING merrily and joking with his tall, shining roan, a much younger Jed Slone—as the older one told it to Wyatt Earp now—rode a trail winding through the mountains of Sinaloa. Slone was carefree, foot-loose and fancy-free, but he suffered from an ailment rather common to young men, Texas cowhands in particular. Jed Slone had a bad case of travel-itch. He desired to go places, and he went.

Which was why he was at the moment some four hundred miles south of the Mexican border and bound for no place in particular.

The trail Slone was riding wound down into a narrow valley walled in by tall mountains with precipitous slopes. From the upper heights it had the look of cow country and Slone felt that he could do a little riding for a while. As he rode lower he became interested and a trifle puzzled by a column of thick, black smoke that rose steadily from somewhere a few miles ahead.

"Looks like enough fire down there to boil a heap of frijoles on," he told Blaze, little more than a spirited colt at that time.

"A pot of seasoned-up beans with plenty of meat in 'em wouldn't go bad right now. June along, you grass-burner. I can't make out on green fodder."

The trail dropped lower and lower until it reached the valley floor. Slone rode on, eyeing the column of smoke that appeared and reappeared through rifts in the growth. He rounded a bend and jerked Blaze to a halt. He was looking squarely into the muzzles of five leveled rifles.

"The hands raise," said a voice in halting English.

Slone elevated. There was nothing else to do. Fast as were his gun hands, to reach would be tantamount to committing suicide.

"What's the idea, *amigos?*" he called in fluent Spanish.

"That you will learn," a swarthy, hard-eyed individual replied in the same tongue. "None may enter Hidden Valley without giving account. Descend from the saddle, and keep your hands where they are."

Slone unforked. While three riflles held him under their muzzles, two of his captors sidled around until they were behind him. They swiftly relieved him of his guns.

"March," said the leader of the band. "Straight ahead."

Slone marched. He was beginning to get rather irritated. It was not unusual for ranch or mine owners to halt stran-

gers here in the mountain fastnesses and insist that they make known their business before proceeding. But this appeared rather high-handed, to say the least.

However, he couldn't do anything but obey orders. Doubtless the *haciendado,* or mine owner responsible, would quickly straighten things out when his over-zealous hands brought the captive before him. So Slone trudged on in his high-heeled boots, his arms uncomfortably above his head. His horse was led behind him.

They rounded another bend and there appeared, not a ranchhouse, but a big, comfortable-looking cabin built of logs and roofed with split poles. A little farther on was a long, low structure also built of logs. Slone got a glimpse of narrow windows barred with iron.

Beyond the second building, a tall, reddish cliff jutted into the valley. At its base he could make out men toiling with pick and shovel in the blazing sun. Near the cliff was what appeared to be a furnace of some sort built of rough stone blocks. From it rose the column of smoke the young Texan had noted as he rode down the trail.

Straight to the cabin his captors herded him. The door was flung open and he was shoved inside.

Seated at a table littered with glasses, bottles and dirty dishes was a big, heavily bearded swarthy man with hard black eyes. He looked up at the commotion and spoke, to Slone's surprise, in English.

"So, caught another one," he said. "Looks strong, too. Lock him up till mornin'."

"Say!" Slone demanded wrathfully. "What's the big idea? What in hell do you mean—"

The man at the table gestured with his hand. A rifle barrel crashed against the Texan's head and he sprawled senseless on the floor.

WHEN Jed Slone regained consciousness, he was lying on a filthy bunk in a long room dimly lighted by a single smoky oil lamp. A man was seated beside him, bathing his temples with a damp cloth. Slone gazed up dazedly into a dark, haggard face.

"What the devil?" he muttered. "Who are you?"

The man shook his head. Slone repeated the question in Spanish.

"Senor, I am a slave," the man replied, "as are these my companions. As you are now. Slaves of *el Diablo,* as we call him."

Slone stared at him. He wondered if he had lost his mind or was stretched on a bed of fever and undergoing some ghastly nightmare. He struggled to sit up, shook his aching head.

"Here," said the Mexican, "drink this. It will restore your strength."

He held a battered tin cup to Slone's lips. The Texan's mouth was parched. He gulped the water thirstily. His brain was clearing. The Mexican gave him more to drink. Other men were crowding around, peering at him.

"Can't you explain things a little clearer," Slone asked the good Samaritan with the cup.

"Senor," the man replied, "as I said we are slaves. The slaves of Don Carlos Faunce. We work his quicksilver mine. We are held captive in this accursed valley and forced to labor till we drop with the terrible sickness. Those who cannot work any more are shot. There is a second mine farther down the valley, owned by a countryman of mine, one Don Estevan Tovar, a man of wealth and importance, who is even more cruel than *el Diablo.* It is Don Carlos who captures men of the villages to the north and brings them here to toil and die in the sun. How come you to fall into his hands, senor? We have no *Americanos* other than Don Carlos."

Slone told him briefly.

The Mexican shook his head. "It were better had you died by their rifles," he said.

"I don't know," Slone replied. "While you are alive, you still have a chance."

"None here," the Mexican said. "We are the living dead. Death is our only release."

"Don't know about that, either," Slone

said. "There should be a way to escape."

"None." The answer was positive. "You will learn. Tomorrow, when you go forth to toil. Here is food, such as it is. We saved some for you. Eat, for you must be strong if you would live."

Slone, beginning to realize what he was up against, managed to gulp down the unsavory mess. He knew enough of the land of *mañana* to understand that such conditions as prevailed here were not as fantastic as they appeared in the telling.

He gazed at the silent group around him. On several of the group he detected the first signs of the dread mercurial poisoning—the falling hair, the receding gums and loosened teeth, the blotches staining the skin.

"Tomorrow when you go forth to toil, do not resist, or refuse to work," cautioned the Mexican. "You will be whipped to death. We have seen it done."

"I'll work," Slone replied grimly. "Till I get a chance to even up the score."

He sank back on the bunk, overcome by a sudden nausea, and drifted into sleep that was really a stupor.

Slone went to the mine with the others as soon as it was light. Stripped to the waist, he took his place with the pickers and shovelers at the cliff base. Others stoked the furnace and fed the cinnabar ore into the makeshift retort. About them swirled the black, poisonous smoke escaping from the faulty apparatus. At a little distance stood guards armed with rifles. Nearer were overseers who carried whips.

Slone straightened up to ease his aching back. An overseer barked a curse. A lash whistled out. Slone gasped as the thong coiled about his ribs like a circle of fire. A gutteral word of command, and another blow. Slone bent to the back-breaking toil, gritting his teeth.

No cry had escaped his lips. But in his heart seethed a red rage. He had a wild impulse to seize the whip wielder and break him in two across his knee, but he knew that instant death would be the result. He must restrain himself, and await, or make opportunity.

TWO WEEKS passed, weeks of torture. Slone's back was criss-crossed with whip scars. Already he was feeling the effects of constant exposure to the deadly fumes. But in his heart that red flame of rage and hate burned ever brighter. And then his chance came.

Don Carlos Faunce—*el Diablo*—had appropriated Slone's big young roan for his own use. Daily he would ride up to watch the work and to make sarcastic remarks to the Texan, against whom he appeared to hold a senseless hatred. Now and then he would order an overseer to hand out a few lashes with the whip.

One day he dismounted and left Blaze standing while he inspected the flow of the silvery liquid metal trickling from the retort. Slone at the moment was only a few paces from one of the rifle-bearing guards. The guard turned to glance along the line of workers, his back to Slone.

Instantly the Texan acted. A single bound and he had reached the guard.

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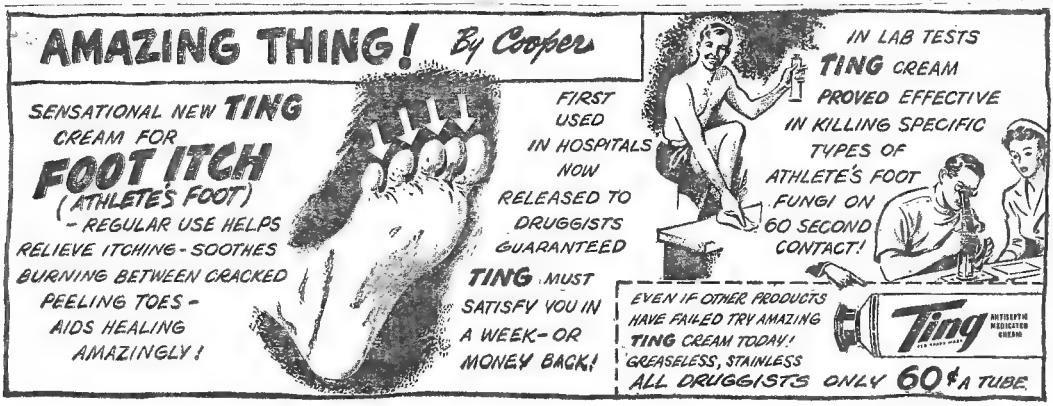

When the fellow whirled with a startled yelp, Slone jerked the rifle from his hands and slammed the barrel against his head. At the same instant his voice rang out:

"To me, feller!"

The roan shot forward with a snort. Before the confused guards realized what was happening, he was crashing up the valley with Slone in the saddle, emptying the rifle at the yelling mob. Answering bullets stormed around him, but the guards had been thrown off-balance and their screeching lead failed to find a mark. Another moment and Slone was around the bend and out of sight.

At racing speed he drove the roan, boring into the mountains. There he left the trail and followed a faint game track that climbed slope after slope. In his heart the fires of hatred burned ever brighter, and a grim desire for vengeance. And as he rode he made a plan.

Jed Slone had a friend in the mountains, about forty miles to the north. Some weeks before he entered the valley of the living dead, he had rescued an old Yaqui Indian from almost certain death, and at more than a little risk to his own life. The Yaqui's horse had stumbled and fallen, throwing his rider over the lip of a steep slope that ended abruptly in a drop of hundreds of feet to a canyon floor.

The Yaqui, helpless with a broken leg and a dislocated arm, lay within a few feet of the sheer drop when Slone, riding past, sighted him from the trail. Slone had quickly tied his rope hard and fast to the saddle-horn, slid down the slope and, after a terrific struggle, managed to get the injured man to safety.

Following the Indian's directions, he had reached the Yaqui village, far up in the mountains. The old man proved to be chief of the tribe and his gratitude and that of his people was profound. Slone passed a pleasant couple of weeks with the Yaquis, hunting and fishing and taking part in their festivities. Now he was again seeking the village.

"And if you ask me, it'll be a case of good chickens coming home to roost," he told Blaze. "Yaquis don't forget."

When Jed Slone rode into the mountain village, gaunt, haggard and half-naked, the Indians crowded around him, volleying questions. The old chief came limping out of his lodge, demanding order, and getting it.

"My brother!" he called. "What has happened to you?"

Slone told him. A look of malignant hatred passed over the Yaqui's dark face. He ground his teeth together.

"I have heard of that place accursed," he said. "Come!"

He led Slone into the lodge, where soothing poultices were applied to his sore and lacerated back and clean garments of buckskin were brought him.

"What does my brother wish?" asked the chief.

"I want guns, and I want twenty of your young men," Slone told him. "I aim to clean out that nest of sidewinders and free the poor devils down there."

WITHOUT a word the chief turned and entered an inner room. He returned bearing double cartridge belts from which hung heavy guns with plain black handles.

"They were carried by one whose name you would doubtless recognize, did you hear it," said the Yaqui. "But that name is as the names of dead chiefs and not to be spoken in the land. They fought for the right. Take them, my brother. There are none finer to be had. And use them well."

Slone tested the perfect balance of the splendid weapons. He buckled the belts around his lean waist.

"I'll use them well," he promised the chief.

Two nights later, Slone led his fierce mountain *Indios* into the valley just as dawn was breaking. *El Diablo* and his men slept in false security while around them closed a ring of death. Finally the guards and overseers came forth to lead the captives to their day of toil.

Yaqui rifles spat fire. The guards went down, howling and screaming. *El Diablo* himself rushed from the cabin. Both

Slone's guns let go with a rattling crash. *El Diablo* screamed in agony as the slugs tore through his entrails. Slone fired again and again, till his guns were empty and Carlos Faunce was a bullet-riddled corpse.

The prison house was burst open, the captives freed. Slone herded them into the trail.

"*Capitan,*" one exclaimed. "There is much gold in the cabin."

"Get it," Slone told them. "We'll need it for what we have to do."

By secret trails the Yaquis led them to their mountain stronghold, where no attack need be feared.

"I kept those fellers there a month, till they were back in good shape," Slone concluded his story to Wyatt Earp. "The old chief got guns and horses for 'em with the gold from Faunce's cabin. It didn't take me long to whip that bunch into as salty an outfit of fighters as you'd want to meet. Most of 'em had been *vaqueros* at one time or another and guns and saddles were nothin' new to them. We rode back down the valley and cleaned out the other nest of varmints at the second mine. The Yaquis took the workers into the mountains till they were in shape to scatter. I rode north with my bunch. I knew we'd be hunted men and that our only safety lay in makin' the Border."

He paused to roll a cigarette, chuckling a little.

"We took better than six months to make the trip," he said then. "We made it a sort of crusade. Whenever we came onto somethin' that wasn't just right, we handed out some justice and straightened things up. I reckon maybe it was a loco thing to do, but maybe the latigo on my mind slipped a little in that valley and I kept seein' red for a long time. We sure left a trail of dead hellions behind us, and got considerable of a reputation."

"Yes," Wyatt Earp agreed drily. "Even up here."

"Of course we stepped on quite a few important toes," Slone said. "The authorities pawed sod for fair. We routed a few private expeditions sent against us and we always managed to outrun the *rurales.* We never had a showdown with them, because I figured they were just tryin' to do the job they're paid to do. We didn't pay 'em much mind. But when a detachment of troops was sent to run us down, I decided it was time to hightail. So we crossed the Border into New Mexico and proceeded to scatter. Some of the boys stayed over there, but the majority of 'em, especially the *vaqueros,* rode on with me for a spell. They're mostly workin' on the spreads over to the east of here, some of 'em not far off. And that's the story of the *Dorados.*"

"And a pretty nice story," said Wyatt Earp. "Makes for nice hearin'. There's plenty down there that needs straightening out."

Slone nodded. "Some day," he remarked prophetically, "a man will rise up who'll do it. A man of the people. And then there'll be a different Mexico. A Mexico that will be plumb friendly to America and will stand by us in time of trouble."

CHAPTER XII

Frenchy's Canyon

EARP rose to his feet, stretched his long arms over his head. He made no further comment about Slone's story, but his lips were grim.

"Think I'll amble down to the barn and see if my horse is all right," he said instead. "Garcia should be ridin' in any minute now, I reckon."

"Should be," Slone agreed. He entered the ranchhouse and came face to face with Gypsy Cameron.

"I heard it all, Jed!" she exclaimed. "What you did was wonderful! Perhaps it wasn't ladylike to eavesdrop, but I just had to hear every word. But why in the name of heaven do you have to go riding off again and risking your life? It isn't fair!"

"Isn't fair to who?" Slone asked.

"You stupid ox!" she stormed at him. "Do you have to ask?"

Slone stared at her. Then his long arms reached out with crushing force. Her lithe body pressed close against his. Her lips were a clinging, pulsing flame.

"And just to think," Slone told her when at last he lingeringly let her go, "I didn't think I'd have a chance against Amado Fuentes."

"You would be just that stupid," Gypsy scolded him. "If Amado Fuentes had ever come into my room in the middle of the night, with me wearing nothing but a nightgown, I'd have screamed my head off."

"Maybe you would have anyhow, if I hadn't left when I did," Slone said.

"Well, you didn't try to find out," she retorted, snuggling close.

At that moment, the arrival of old Garcia provided what was perhaps a timely interruption. There was no opportunity for a resumption of that amazingly wonderful interlude, either, after that. There was man's work to be done, and much to be discussed and settled before nightfall.

Night had fallen when the posse left the ranch on their forty-mile ride to the Whetstones.

"I can point the way to the canyon," Bill Jackson told Slone. "I know the trails. But after that it's up to somebody else. I don't know nothin' about that hole."

"I don't either," admitted Wyatt Earp. "I know the location of Mirandos Robles' cabin not far inside the mouth of the canyon, but that's about all."

"Reckon it will be my chore from there on, then," said Slone. "I've had some considerable experience at that sort of work."

Earp nodded. "We've got to trail Mirandos up the canyon," he said. "That's the only way we can find his brother's hole-up in that mess of rocks, brush and side canyons. I don't know how we'll do it. Horses can be heard a mile on those rocks."

"I'll take care of that," Slone promised. "We'll work out a scheme when we get there."

The moon was low in the west when they reached the mouth of the brush-grown, boulder-strewn canyon, on the slopes of which the wood cutter obtained his merchandise. Everything was dark and silent, with no signs of life. Occasionally from the black depths came the lonely, hauntingly beautiful plaint of a hunting wolf, to be answered by the querulous whine of an owl perched on the topmost branch of some dead tree.

Above towered the mighty mass of the Whetstones, shouldering the stars. To the east could be dimly seen the vast and craggy bulk of the Dragoons. The scene was weird and sinister in the light of the dying moon.

After taking counsel, the posse holed up in a thicket some hundreds of yards from the canyon mouth, but affording a clear view of the approach to the gorge.

"Get the rigs off the broncs," suggested Slone. "Popping saddle leather or the jingle of bit irons can be heard a long ways."

"And then we might as well try to get a wink or two of sleep till daylight," said Earp. "Robles won't be along with his wagon till well along in the mornin'. Then we'll see what we can do."

FROM his saddle pouch, Jed Slone took a pair of finely-made buckskin moccasins which he donned in place of his high-heeled boots.

"The Yaquis gave 'em to me," he explained. "They're just the thing for sneakin' along quiet-like. Boot heels make almost as much noise as horses' irons, and besides I'd be lame in high heels before I covered a mile. Can keep goin' in these all day. As I figure it, I've got to trail the wagon up the canyon. You fellers can foller, a mile or so back, keepin' as quiet as possible and tryin' to stay out of sight in case somebody is watchin' up on the slopes. Though I don't think they will be. When I've spotted the hangout I'll slip back and meet you. After that we'll act accordin' to how things work out."

"It's a bad bunch, don't forget that," Earp warned. "Every man in it is a killer and knows a rope end is waitin' for him if

he's caught. They won't be taken without a fight, even though we get a drop on 'em. But I want to get at least one alive. Might be able to make him talk. I'm pretty sure there are more to the bunch than took part in that stage robbery, but there's no guarantee they'll all be up there. Like I told you, I don't expect more'n five, the fellers that was in the holdup. My boys figured Mirandos Robles was packin' just about enough chuck each time to keep that many goin'."

With the horses rope-coralled in the thicket, and with the additional precaution of hobbles, the mounts were turned loose to graze on the grass under the trees and bushes. The posse stretched out on the ground with their saddles for pillows and were soon fast asleep.

At last, far across the San Pedro Valley, the blue forerunner of the dawn touched the lofty spires of the Dragoons. The eastern sky grew ashen gray. The stars paled from gold to silver, dwindled to needle-points of steel and winked out. A wan shadow of light flickered across the zenith. The crests of the Dragoons began to glow. Another moment and they were tipped with fire. The spires and battlements stood forth like frozen flame.

The east flushed rose, deepened to scarlet barred and splashed with gold. A shaft of intense radiance shot upward and dropped to earth. Birds began singing in the thickets. A little breeze shook down myriad dew gems from the grass-heads. Beads of opal and pearl burned on twig and leaf as the rim of the sun appeared above the mountains.

Light poured over the rangeland like a flood. The shadows in the canyons turned from purple to blue and thinned away like melting mist. A coyote yipped his morning song, and it was day.

Jed Slone was the first to awaken. He sat up, stretching his long arms above his head. He swore pleasantly at Blaze, who was regarding him with a questioning eye. He sprang lightly to his feet and gazed along the ribbon of trail that led to Contention. It was utterly deserted for the mile or more he could see. Chuckling, he began kindling a fire about the size of a soup plate.

"Hey!" exclaimed Wyatt Earp, sitting up. "Somebody is liable to see the smoke."

"Not the way I'll build it," declared Slone, feeding tinder-dry bits of wood to the blaze. "I've got a bucket and coffee in my pouches. Feel a swig would come in sort of handy. And Miss Gypsy packed some sandwiches and cake in the other boys' pouches. Somebody fill the bucket with water from that trickle over there. Soon be ready to eat."

As Slone said, the fire gave off practically no smoke, and what it did was so pale a blue in color that it was invisible in the misty morning air from only a few yards distant.

"Well, that helps," said Earp, as with a sigh he drained a final cup of steaming coffee. "You must have spent considerable time in the woods, feller."

"Uh-huh, a lot," Slone admitted. "Caught on to quite a few little tricks you don't learn on the rangeland. When I was

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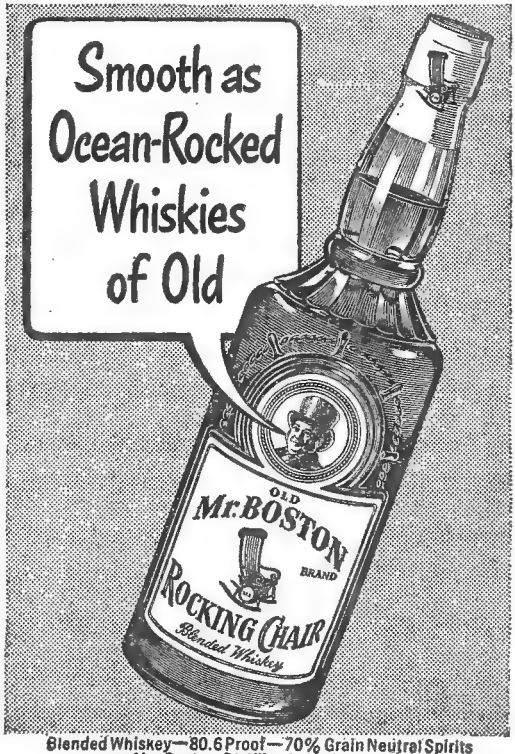

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in school I got sort of friendly with a jigger from up Canada way. Spent several summers with him, in the woods up there. He taught me some things that's come in mighty handy at times. Likely some of 'em will today."

"Already made a good start, I'd say," remarked Pete Worthington, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "If I'd built that fire you could see the smoke for five miles. And that coffee sure did hit the spot."

"And now," said Wyatt Earp, "there's nothin' to do but wait."

THEY waited, all through the long morning and far into the afternoon. Just as they were about to despair of the quarry showing, a dark blotch appeared on the trail. It quickly resolved to a speeding light wagon drawn by two horses. On the seat was a squat, dark-faced man whose eyes kept shooting glances in every direction.

"Mirandos Robles," breathed Wyatt Earp. "And he's got a load of stuff in the wagon."

Into the gorge mouth boomed the wagon, tires grinding on the stones, horses' irons clicking. It vanished from their sight. Gradually its rumble died away.

"His cabin is about half a mile up the canyon," said Earp. "Now what?"

"Reckon it's up to me," said Slone. "I'm headin' after him. Think he'll stop at the cabin?"

"Chances are he will, but not for long," replied Earp.

"All right," said Slone. "Give me half an hour and then start. If Robles is still at the cabin at that time, I'll hightail back down the canyon and meet you. Otherwise, keep on comin' but not too fast. I'll keep Robles in sight and be ready to warn you in time when he stops. So long."

At a long, lithe lope he set off up the canyon, dodging in and out amid the growth, peering and listening. Within a surprisingly short time he sighted the cabin set within the shadow of a cliff. The unhitched wagon stood before it. Even as Slone paused to watch, Mirandos Robles came out of the cabin bearing a plump sack. He heaved it into the wagon bed, climbed to the seat, and started his horses. At a good pace he rolled up the gorge.

Slone followed, breathing easily, pacing the wagon by sound. Always he kept far enough behind to be safe should Robles unexpectedly turn. And always he studied his surroundings with eyes that missed nothing.

CHAPTER XIII

"Slone Don't Forget"

ONE hour of steady going passed. Slone was still breathing easily, but his legs were beginning to feel the strain a little. He could tell by the sound of the grinding tires that the wagon was slowing somewhat as the going grew rougher. For a little while he resorted to the scout's manner of trailing —running fifty paces, walking fifty. The wagon slowly drew away from him, but at the end of another half-hour his muscles were rested and he resumed his steady lope.

Evening was not far off and shadows were already clustering at the base of the cliffs and slopes. Soon it would be full dark. Slone swore under his breath.

"Is that hellion going clear to California?" he wanted to know. "Hell, but this is a hole! Nothin' but rocks and brush, and gettin' narrower all the time."

Reassured by the deepening gloom, he increased his pace. Soon he was close behind the wagon. Once he sighted it, through a rift in the growth. Right after that the sound of grinding tires suddenly ceased. Slone halted instantly, crouching behind a bush, peering and listening. A full minute passed, then once more came the sound of tires on the stones.

Slone stared ahead suspiciously. "Now what the devil did he stop for?" he wondered.

He hestitated, listening intently. There might have been some simple reason for Robles pulling to a halt, but Slone was

worried. A slip now would be fatal. He left the faint track the wagon followed and wormed his way through the brush. He could still hear the moving tires. Then again the sound ceased, and was not resumed. Slone crept on, every nerve tense.

Abruptly he halted. Standing in the trail, half-concealed by a big boulder, was a man who peered intently down canyon.

"Smart," Slone breathed. "Smart as a tree full of owls. Uh-huh, plumb necked up with savvy. Got a jigger posted down here on the chance Mirandos is wearin' a tail. Got to get that jigger out of the way fast, and quiet."

Again he stole forward, taking advantage of every bit of cover, careful not to make the lightest sound. He circled the boulder until he was behind the silent watcher. Then he glided forward a few more steps, hands outstretched.

The man caught the slight scuffling of his moccasins on the rocks and whirled, hand streaking for his gun. But Slone caught him by the wrist and the throat, choking his alarmed shout to a strangling whimper. Silently they struggled in a deadly embrace.

The man was not large, but he seemed to be made of steel wire, and he was as active as a cat. He writhed and twisted, battered at Slone's face with his free hand, hooked his heel behind Slone's ankle and gave a mighty wrench.

Slone felt himself going down. He hurled himself backward, jerking down on his antagonist's wrist and throat with every atom of his strength. His grip was torn loose as he struck the ground. The man shot over his head as if hurled from a catapault. His head struck a boulder with a thudding crunch. He flopped to the ground, his heels beating a queer, spasmodic tattoo on the stones. But before Slone reached him, gun clubbed to strike, he was still. The Texan peered into his blood-smeared face.

"Busted his skull like an egg shell!" he panted. "Well, that takes care of that."

Straightening up, he raced down the canyon.

In five minutes he sighted the posse riding slowly forward through the shadows. He called a low-voiced warning.

"Light off and come a-streakin'," he told them. "Not a minute to lose."

As they raced up the canyon, Slone told them what had happened.

"When that jigger don't show up in a little while, that is if he's not posted there for the night, they'll get suspicious," he concluded. "The cabin can't be far aff. We've got to get there and hit 'em before they start wonderin' about that hellion. Come on, over this way, and don't make a noise."

He slowed the pace and they crept on. Soon they sighted the dark bulk of the cabin. A light glowed from a window. A little way off stood the wagon, the horses still hitched.

Slone veered to one side and they marched up until they were but a few yards from the closed door.

"CATCH your breath, then we'll rush them," he told his companions. "We've got to be right on top of 'em before they know we're here. Right through the door and ready for business!"

A flying wedge, they raced forward, Slone in the lead. He hit the door with his shoulder, crashed it open and barged into the room. Four men busily removing provisions from the sacks Mirandos Robles had brought whirled at the sound.

"Elevate!" thundered Wyatt Earp. "You're covered!"

But the command was unheeded. The four had whirled with guns in their hands. Instantly the cabin rocked to a roar of reports.

Shooting with both hands, Jed Slone saw a man fall, and a second. A fiery streak seared along his ribs. The table crashed over. The lamp on it flared out. Red flashes gushed through the gloom as the guns continued to roar.

Then abruptly all was silent. Standing with both guns cocked, Slone peered through the shadows.

"Hold up!" cried Wyatt Earp. "I think it's finished. Somebody strike a light."

Slone groped about and found the lamp.

Its chimney was shattered but the brass bowl was intact. He fumbled a match, struck it, and touched it to the wick. A flickering flame flared up. By its wavering light Slone saw four bodies sprawled on the floor. Blood was dripping from Bill Jackson's gashed ear. Worthington had a hole through his left arm. Slone himself could feel blood trickling from the crease along his ribs.

Wyatt Earp, as usual, was untouched. It was said that the bullet wasn't run that could nick him. It could not be guessed, then, but he was to die in bed at eighty, unscarred by lead.

Earp took the lamp and peered into the faces of the dead men. All were swarthy, hard-featured.

"Here's Three-finger Jack, Mirandos Roble's brother!" Earp exclaimed. "But the hellion who shot that guard, Porter, ain't here. Phillips said he was a big tall jigger. These are all short fellers. How about the one you did for down the gulch, Slone?"

"He was short, too," Slone replied. "Not nearly as tall as I am."

Wyatt Earp swore feelingly. "Then one of 'em, maybe more, is still running around loose," he rumbled. "We'll tie up Pete's arm, then let's look this shack over and see what we can find."

They found plenty of interest. A heap of saddle pouches in a corner disgorged nearly twenty thousand dollars in gold.

"But there was forty thousand in that strongbox on the stage," said Earp. "Looks like the big jigger took a hog's cut, or there were others to whack up with."

In a bunk Bill Jackson discovered four shirts fashioned from gaudy yellow cloth.

"Here are the duds they wore the night of the hold-up," he said. "These like the ones your fellers wore down below the Line, Slone?"

"About the same color, but not made the same," Slone said, after inspecting the garments. "This ain't Mexican work."

On a shelf Slone found a bottle of some dark liquid.

"Looks like boot polish," observed Worthington.

"Too thin and too dark, I'd say," Slone replied. He was struck by a sudden notion. He dipped his finger into the liquid. "Don't mind, do you?"

He touched the finger tip to Wyatt Earp's yellow hair. Instantly a dark spot showed.

"Thought so," he said. "Some sort of hair dye. Looks somethin' like the stuff the Indians use to darken their skins for tribal dances and such. They've told me about it, and I've used it myself sometimes, down below the Line, to keep my own reddish topknot from bein' too plain a target. Easy to wash off if you use soap, but plain water won't touch it."

"Don't see what these hellions would want with hair dye," commented Jackson. "Couldn't make theirs any blacker'n it is, or their faces, either. I'd say they all got more'n their share of Apache blood."

Slone nodded, his eyes thoughtful, a frown between his brows. He corked the bottle tightly and slipped it into his pocket.

NOTHING further of interest was found.

"Well," said Wyatt Earp, glancing around, "there's lots of good chuck here and I'm hungry. Suppose we get a fire goin' and cook somethin'? Better take the rigs off that team out there and turn 'em loose to graze. We'll lug these carcasses out and load 'em into the wagon to take to town. Pick up the one Slone did for as we head out."

"I'll slip down and bring in our cayuses," Slone volunteered. "And Bill, you hole up beside the trail a little ways down and keep watch, in case some more enterprisin' gents belongin' to the bunch take a notion to drop in. That might happen. I'll relieve you when chuck's ready."

After eating, they decided to spend the night at the cabin, taking turns at standing guard. At daybreak they set out for town, the wagon loaded with the recovered gold and the bodies of the slain owlhoots.

The procession with its grisly cargo caused wild excitement as it rolled

through the streets of Tombstone. When the story got around, the posse was showered with praise and congratulations.

"Wyatt Earp sure put one over on Johnny Behan this time, and the owlhoots, too," citizens chuckled. "Johnny will be fit to be tied and reckon Curly Bill Brocius will paw sod for fair."

"Understand the affair was really handled by that big feller Jed Slone, rather than by Wyatt," was remarked. "He's a whizzer."

"Uh-huh, been raisin' hell and shovin' a chunk under a corner ever since he coiled his twine in this section. Only feller ever heard of that made Curly Bill and his bunch take water and back down. Just the same, I wouldn't want to be in his boots. Brocius won't forget."

"Don't worry about Slone," said others, "he can take care of himself. It's Brocius and his bunch that need to keep their eyes plumb open and walk careful. Slone don't forget either."

CHAPTER XIV

Caught in the Middle

KILLING the Mexican smugglers in Skeleton Canyon was a "skeleton" in Curly Bill's closet that refused to stay shut up. He knew that the Mexican youth who alone had escaped the fire of the outlaws would never forget the demoniac, bearded face glaring toward him through the swirling smoke. Nor would he ever forget his three brothers who had been foully slain. Their blood cried out for vengeance.

Others south of the Border felt the same. The massacre in the gorge of dry bones was the culmination of a long series of outrages, and fanned hatred to a white heat. The dark men below the Line plotted revenge, and proceeded to carry it out.

Six of Curly Bill's outlaws raided into Mexico and lifted a herd of three hundred prime beef cattle. On the way back, before they reached safety, they and others of Brocius' men fought a running battle with the Mexican *vaqueros,* in which nineteen Mexicans died. Flushed with victory, the owlhoots brought in their stolen beefs and sold them to Old Man Clanton.

Clanton paid fifteen dollars a head for the cows and considered it a fair price. He gave no thought to the fact that he also might pay for that herd with his blood.

The Old Man decided to drive the herd to the Tombstone market. Riding with him were Dick Gray and Billy Lang, cowhands from neighboring ranches. Also along were three outlaws, Bud Snow, Harry Ernshaw, and Jim Crane—the Jim Crane who got a bullet-hole through his shoulder when he tangled with Amado Fuentes in Wyatt Earp's Oriental Saloon in Tombstone. All were hard men and expert at handling cattle. Clanton expected no difficulties in the course of the drive.

But the Mexican youth in whose heart burned vengeance never let the Old Man with the Beard out of his sight for long. On lonely hilltops he watched and waited, an elusive wraith never come up with by anyone.

From chaparral thickets his face, older than its years with hatred, peered forth. He haunted the vicinity of Clanton's home in the Animas Valley which, to show Clanton's contempt for the Mexicans he had robbed and killed, was less than a mile from the Mexican border. From a point of vantage, the sole survivor of Skeleton Canyon saw this herd take the trail.

The first night out the herd bedded down six miles inside Guadalupe Canyon and a half-mile below the Line in Mexico.

It was a dismal and disagreeable night with a thin mist of rain falling. But there was no wind and no thunder. The steaming herd slept peacefully through the night. Harry Ernshaw standing cocktail, the last guard for the night-hawk, eyed the peaceful cattle through the gray light of the rainy morning and decided they would do by themselves while he loafed up to camp for a cup of coffee.

When Ernshaw reached the camp it

was already astir and preparations for breakfast were under way in the half light. As the blaze of the fire began to flicker up brightly, Old Man Clanton walked to it and stood warming his back. The others were grouped around him, occupied with various tasks. Facing them was the sloping canyon wall, brush straggling darkly upward to the brightening sky.

From that dark wall suddenly spurted lances of flame. The growth quivered to terrestial thunderings. Old Man Clanton fell backward without a sound. Dick Gray shrilled his death cry as the slugs hammered the life from his body. Jim Crane fell sideward into the fire, scattering smouldering embers in every direction. Billy Lang sank slowly to his knees as if in prayer he never uttered and toppled over. Bud Snow dropped the coffee pot he was filling and fell lifeless on top of it.

Ernshaw alone, who was mounted, escaped, riding for his life with bullets whining around him. He hardly drew rein until he reached Curly Bill Brocius' stronghold in the Chiricahuas.

Back in the rain-washed canyon, a coyote lifted his nose and yipped the food call to his companions. One by one, the silent black buzzards drifted down on planing wings. But bearded, yellow-faced Clanton and his men heeded not the gathering to the broken meats of the feast. They lay motionless with unseeing eyes staring starkly up to where the clouds were thinning and the golden sunlight pouring down on a world all glorious with morning.

CURLY BILL'S face was black with rage when he heard of the killings.

"What did I tell you?" he stormed to a group of his worried owlhoots. "Jed Slone and his infernal yellow shirts! Nobody else could have planned and put over the chore like that. I tell you none of us is safe so long as that big hellion is swallerforkin' around loose."

"Bill," said somber-eyed John Ringo, "I wonder if we hadn't better pull out? I'm afraid we're up against somethin' too big for us—a man as salty as we are but who always fights with the right on his side. I've a feelin' I haven't got much longer to live, and I'd sort of like to enjoy peaceful what's left."

Curly Bill fell suddenly silent. He was a man of keen mind, shrewd, foresighted. When he spoke it was in a different voice.

"John," he said, "sometimes I wonder if you ain't right. What do we get out of it all, anyhow? Risk our lives to get a stake. Drunk and raisin' hell for a couple of weeks. Then sick as dogs for another week. And then the whole thing to do over and more risks to take. Yeah, I sometimes get to wonderin', too. Down in Mexico I know an old feller who owns more cows than any of you ever saw. I visited him once. He figured me to be a cattle buyer. He's got a daughter that's purty as a spotted pony and plumb nice.

"The old man took a shine to me, and so did the gal. When the old man cashes in his chips, which won't be long now—he's already almighty old—she'll own all them cows and the big ranchhouse and the land. If I throw up all this and slide down there and marry her, I can spend the rest of my days as an honest rancher with nothin' to worry about. Uh-huh, John, I sometimes get to wonderin', too. And that cussed Slone lobo has sure given me a jolt."

He lapsed into silence again. The others were silent also. Billy Clanton and the McLowery brothers stared stonily into the nothingness. Perhaps in their minds was a premonition that bloody death might soon be theirs.

Frank Stilwell moved his head nervously, as if already he felt the hot breath of a flaming rifle blasting him into eternity. Indian Charlie, his dark face twisted as if in pain, muttered soundlessly under his breath. Maybe he visioned a stark form lying motionless on a lonely mountainside, with the ants running in and out of eyeless sockets.

From the blue mystery of the Chiricahaus sounded the challenging call of a hunting wolf . . .

At the Cross G, Bill Jackson was still

complaining about missing cows, so Slone resumed riding the slopes and canyons of the Huachucas. Day after day he combed and searched, and still found nothing.

But his activities did not go unnoticed. One of the men Curly Bill had assigned to the task of getting rid of Jed Slone was a breed known as Apache Charley. He was three-fourths Apache, shrewd, observant and utterly vicious, though not particularly noted for courage.

Charley kept tabs on Jed Slone's movements with Indian stealth and cunning, haunting the slopes along the base of which Slone rode. It did not take him long to realize that Slone was hunting for something. And little longer to decide correctly what it was.

He was not a very good shot, and knew better than to try to drill Slone at a range of a thousand yards, something a better rifleman might have attempted. And he had not the least desire or intention of getting closer to the grim, keen-eyed Texan and his deadly guns.

So Indian Charley made a plan, the sort of plan that might have been expected to birth in his furtive, half-wild mind. He noted carefully where Slone left off riding one evening. Then he rode to Galeyville and enlisted the aid of others. The outlaws applauded his scheme and jumped at the chance of doing away with their enemy once and for all.

LATE one afternoon, in the course of his wearisome search, Jed Slone hit on something of interest. On what was little more than a game track winding westward into the hills he discovered the plainly marked prints of horses' irons, heading west. There was no apparent good reason for anybody riding the track, and the prints were fresh. After a moment's hestitation he decided to follow them.

"May be nothin' to it, but then again there might be," he thought. "Looks like the goin' ain't too steep for cows. This might be it. Anyhow, we'll have a look-see."

Almost due west the track flowed, with the fresh hoof marks scarring its course. There had been rain the night before and the ground was soft. Slone was well up

[*Turn page*]

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into the mountains, with the track edging a gentle slope scantily grown with brush and studded with boulders on the north. Beyond the slope was a level stretch that extended for an unknown distance and also dotted with scattered clumps of chaparral. To the south the cliffs rose sheer.

The track wound around a shoulder of cliff and straightened to run past a dense stand of chaparral basing the cliffs to the south. And less than a hundred yards farther on the fresh prints ended abruptly.

Jed Slone was too experienced a hand to be taken in by a trick like that. One swift glance, and he spun Blaze around and was racing back the way he had come even as the hidden rifles flamed. Bullets stormed about him as he whipped around the bend. One seared a red weal along his cheek. Then he was beyond the cliff, out of range and going like the wind. Behind sounded baffled shouts and curses, followed by a thudding of fast hoofs.

"A pretty nice try," Slone muttered to Blaze. "And it come mighty close to working. I just about fell for it. If they'd been plumb smart they'd have let one man ride on when they holed up. Then before I caught on it would have been too late. Sift sand, jughead! If they're looking for a race, we'll give 'em one."

He had little fear of the pursuers getting his range again. He did not believe there was a horse in Arizona that Blaze couldn't show his heels to when he really meant business. He hoped that the drygulchers, in their excitement would follow him to the open prairie where, with his horse's superior speed, the advantage would be all his.

"Maybe I'll get a chance to even up for this crease," he muttered, swabbing at the blood that trickled down his face.

And then abruptly things got deadly serious. Whipping around a bend he saw, less than five hundred yards distant, a second band of horsemen, five in number, speeding toward him. With exultant whoops they spurred their horses onward.

"Caught in the middle," Slone growled. "This ain't fun any more."

CHAPTER XV

The Gathering Storm

VEERING Blaze, Jed Slone went charging down the rock-strewn, brush-dotted slope to the left. Blaze snorted his disgust but dodged thickets, leaped boulders, and skated down the slope until he reached the level, his speed hardly slackened.

Bullets were whipping past once more, but the distance was too great for anything like accurate shooting from the back of a moving horse. Slone was still not particularly worried. Barring an unforeseen accident, he felt confident that the superior speed and endurance of his horse would carry him through.

And then the unforeseen became decidedly and unpleasantly visible. Splitting the ground less than a hundred yards ahead was a crevice of unknown depth and a good thirty feet in width. East and west it extended, as far as the eye could reach.

Slone could not turn in either direction. He was the point of a wide triangle, the base of which was the space between the two bands of drygulchers. To ride east or west, paralleling the advancing base, would quickly bring him within easy shooting distance of one bunch or the other.

"You've got to take it, feller!" he shouted to Blaze. "It's our only chance! Over you go!"

Blaze shot forward with accelerated speed, snorting and blowing. Slone estimated the distance to the crevice, tightened his grip on the reins. The take-off was bad, the jump a dangerously long one. The slightest slip and it would be all over. Even though the crevice should prove to be shallow, a fall would put him at the mercy of the pursuers, and from them he could expect no mercy.

Straight for the ragged lip of the crevice Blaze sped. Slone tensed, tightened the grip of his thighs.

"Take it!" he thundered.

Blaze took it, with a squeal of protest. Into the air he soared, up and up, on and on. Slone had a glimpse of vast depths beneath him, of the tops of trees looking like feathers far below. Then, with a crash and a scramble they hit the far lip of the chasm at the very edge.

Blaze stumbled, wavered. One hind leg plunged downward, and for a frightful instant Slone was sure he and the horse were gone. But by a prodigious effort, the blaze-faced roan caught his balance and raced on. Behind sounded a roar of shots and yells of rage. Another moment and Blaze whisked through a thicket and horse and rider were out of sight.

Chuckling, Slone slackened Blaze's pace. "Take it easy, feller," he said. "They won't chance that jump. Wish they would. I figure we'd be shed of everyone that tried it. You're a wonder, feller, but it was almost too much for you. Now where the hell are we, anyhow?"

He rode on until he cleared the thicker brush. Then he reined in and took stock.

To the east the crevice stretched on to split a wall of tall and absolutely sheer cliffs. Slone eyed them and shook his head.

"That's out," he said to the roan. "Don't care to play leapfrog with that hole a second time, even if I was sure the hellions ain't nested up on the trail somewheres, waitin' for us to show. Don't see anything of 'em, but you never can tell. And there are more cliffs over to the north. Looks like our only bet is to amble west till we find a way out of this gulch."

But as he rode on and on, Slone began to despair of ever escaping from the labyrinth of stones and brush and unexpected draws. The canyon, for it was nothing else, flowed steadily westward. The crevice, which had widened greatly, still pursued its inexorable way. And the sun was almost down.

Then, as the sky was flaming scarlet and gold with the sunset, the gorge, steadily sloping upward, topped a rise. Slone could see the level rangeland a couple of miles farther on, and at least a thousand feet below. He had passed clear through the mountain chain!

"And now we'll have to amble clean around the southern end of this tip-tilted chunk of hell," he mumbled, disgustedly. "Looks like we're goin' to be almighty late for breakfast."

WITH the aid of the dying sunlight, Slone made his way down the mountain slope to the level ground. He turned Blaze's nose south and rode steadily, skirting the base of the mountain range. Hour after hour the shining brown horse held to his steady gait, while the stars burned overhead and the great clock in the sky wheeled westward.

About midnight they rounded the southern buttresses of the Huachucas and turned east. More weary hours, and they were able to veer north. Soon afterward they hit on a fair trail and made better speed. Another hour of riding and the trail forked, one branch coming up from the southeast.

"But to hell with that," Slone decided. "We're heading in the right direction to reach home. This track is trendin' a little to the west, which is all to the good. Bein' able to see the Dragoon and the Chiricahuas from here makes for easy goin'. I'm beginning to get a notion of where we are, at last. Startin' to get gray in the east, too. Soon be daylight—Hello, what's that?"

They were only a few hundred yards north of the forks. Out of the darkness ahead was sounding the unmistakable beat of horses' irons on the trail.

"We're taking no chances, horse," Slone muttered. "Into the brush till we get a look-see."

He crowded Blaze into the chaparral growth that flanked the trail on the west and peered cautiously through a rift. To the east was fairly open ground and he had a good view of anything that might pass by. He had barely got set when a group of horsemen bulged into view. Slone counted seven riders. One, riding slightly in front, was considerably taller than his companions.

Silently, save for the thudding of hoofs, the popping of saddle leather and the jingling of bit irons, they swept past, shadowy, unreal, looming huge and grotesque in the gloom. Slone watched them veer into the southeast fork of the trail and ride on. He stared after them until they were lost from sight in the darkness.

Still gazing toward where the horsemen had disappeared, Slone considered.

"Now just who the devil were those hard-ridin' jiggers?" he wondered. "They sure looked to be goin' some place definite. Horse, maybe it's loco, with the miles we got ahead of us, but we'll just tail that bunch for a little while."

He rode down the east fork, careful to keep in the shadow of the straggle of growth that edged the trail to the south, gaging his speed so that he would slowly overtake the bunch ahead. Finally he saw them topping a rise a quarter of a mile or so distant. They swooped down the far sag and out of sight. Slone quickened Blaze's pace, hugging the shadows. At the crest of the rise he pulled to a halt.

Only a few hundred yards ahead and to the left was the shadowy bulk of a big ranchhouse. Even as he gazed, light glimmered through a window. He knew instantly the place to be Amado Fuentes' FA *casa*.

Slone gave a disgusted snort. "We're doing everything wrong this trip," he grumbled, as he turned Blaze. "Just Fuentes and some of his riders headin' home from town. We're stoppin' for nothin' from now on, horse, till we hit the Cross G stable."

THE SUN was well up in the sky when Slone reached the ranchhouse. He helped a wrangler care for Blaze, then headed for the house and something to eat.

"I wonder if you are always going to be like this—away from home half the nights in the week?" Gypsy Cameron observed as she placed before him the food Pedro had prepared. "I waited up till all hours for you last night, and finally got so mad I locked my door before I went to bed, just in case you might make another 'mistake' when you got in. When are we going to get married, anyhow?"

"Darn it, honey," Slone protested, "you know I can't marry you just yet. I've got a chore to finish first. I've got to find out who's liftin' Garcia's cows before I tie up with something that'll make me want to stay home all the time. And besides, I can't support you right on a range boss' wages. I've got to save up a few pesos first."

"You don't need to let that bother you," said Gypsy. "You know Cousin Roberto holds by the old Spanish custom. He'll give me a nice dowry."

"To hell with a dowry!" growled Slone. "I don't want a dowry. I want you! That would be just like another man providing the money for my wife to live on. I wouldn't stand for it. But if you don't stop goin' on this way, I *will* make a 'mistake' with those darn doors some night!"

Gypsy smiled and said nothing more.

CHAPTER XVI

The Promise

COMPLETELY tired out, Slone went to bed and slept for hours. When he descended to the living room, Bill Jackson had just ridden in from town with news.

"Another robbery and more killin's," said Jackson glumly. "When the N.M. and A. passenger train stopped at a little *pueblo* up to the north called Agua Zarca yesterday afternoon, seven fellers held it up. They killed the fireman, the conductor and the express messenger while he was tryin' to close the slidin' door of the express car. They got fifteen thousand dollars. Johnny Behan and a posse headed up there, but I reckon it'll be a cold trail long before they get to Agua Zarca."

Slone regarded Jackson thoughtfully. "You say seven fellers pulled the chore?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Jackson. "They looked to be breeds, 'cordin' to the passengers, all except a big tall black-haired jigger who seemed to be handlin' things. Seemed to know their business. They shot almighty straight and rode good horses. Headed southeast when they left the pueblo. Aimin' to work over to the Chiricahuas, I reckon."

Slone nodded, still looking thoughtful, the frown between his crisp blond brows.

"Well," remarked Gypsy, after Jackson departed for the bunkhouse, "I suppose I'll have to tell Sheriff Behan another lie. And this time it will be a real one. I won't have a shred of reputation left if you don't marry me soon, Jed Slone!"

Slone chuckled. "Reckon we won't have to worry about the sheriff this time," he said. "Nothing was said about yellow shirts."

Nevertheless, he was thoughtful and silent all through supper. Later, in the living room, he was so distrait and his answers were so random that Gypsy finally left him and went to bed in a bad temper.

But Slone sat on by the window for a long time, gazing out at the star-burned night, smoking steadily and thinking. Finally he stood up, shaking his crisp-haired chestnut head.

"The whole thing don't make sense," he decided. "No, it seems to be a plumb loco notion, but just the same I'm going to play a hunch, a hunch based on a tall jigger I'm thinkin' about, a bottle of hair dye and some yellow shirts. That, and Alfred Cushman gettin' shot in the back for no apparent good reason."

The following morning, Slone called Bill Jackson aside.

"Bill," he said, "I'm just about convinced those lifted cows go south. I've scouted the hills to the west and so far as I can find out, there ain't a way through for cattle. The only place I hit on that looked at all practical, day before yesterday, hadn't ever had a cow drove through it, that I'm ready to swear to."

"But how in hell do they go south?" Jackson asked helplessly. "We've kept tabs on the cussed Lobo Trail day and night."

Indian Logic

THE average Indian was "a pretty queer critter," in the opinion of the early pioneers. And the customs and beliefs of the run-of-the-mill Indian certainly were at variance with those of the white man.

For example, the savage thought it sacrilege to use ordinary wild silver sage, which grew practically everywhere, for seasoning his dinner, since it wasn't a commonplace herb to him. Instead, he considered it a sacred plant, fit only to be the food of ghosts. In addition it had the power of purifying his body, whenever he broke a savage taboo or touched anything that his tribe considered to be holy.

The Indian also featured sage prominently when engaged in prayer, singing, and other religious ceremonies, by spreading it on the ground in the area surrounding the bonfire. He made wreaths of it to wear when engaged in his Sun Dance.

The pioneer thought that the Indian belief in regard to spiders was equally curious, for they weren't obnoxious little pests to the redman, to be killed as quickly as they were discovered. Quite the contrary. The savage admired and even venerated the creatures. They were smart enough, in the first place, to do their hunting without leaving their "lodges," which was certainly something much to be envied. Secondly, they spun their webs out of their own small compact bodies. This made them symbols of the Great Spirit.

—*William Carter*

"I think," Slone said slowly, "that they go by way of Amado Fuentes' holdings."

"Shucks!" scoffed Jackson. "That ain't possible. Them breeds what ride for Fuentes — he don't use anything but breeds — is plumb sharp-eyed and they are always on the move, day and night. It couldn't be done without them learnin' what was goin' on."

"You may be right about that," Slone returned with a significance that was lost on Jackson, "but just the same we're goin' to keep tabs on the southeast pastures from now on. I want a couple of men posted down there tonight. If they see anything, tell 'em to bring the word to you, pronto. But warn 'em not to make a move if they do see something. Two men wouldn't have a chance. Don't forget that, Bill. I'm ridin' to town on a little chore, but I'll be back early tomorrow."

Slone rode cautiously and much on the alert, although he had little fear of an attack in the open valley. His keen eyes missed nothing of what went on around him. He watched the movements of birds over thickets and of little animals in the brush, not forgetting that a deer had saved his life on the occasion of his first ride out from Tombstone. He did not relax his vigilance, and did not relax it altogether, until he entered Tombstone.

MEANWHILE, in Galeyville, Curly Bill Brocius sat in conclave with John Ringo, his chief lieutenant.

"I'm beginnin' to believe you're right, John," Brocius said. "There's no gettin' rid of Slone. He comes out on top every brush we have with him. The other day when the boys made the try for him over in the Huachucas, Clanton says all four of 'em cut loose on him at less than a hundred yards, and he wasn't touched. Then when they thought they had him trapped for fair, he jumped that infernal roan colored horse of his over a canyon a hundred feet wide and kept right on ridin' with lead flyin' all around him. I'm beginnin' to believe the bullet ain't run that can get him. He's worse than Wyatt Earp and thinks faster and shoots straighter. Things is gettin' almighty hot, John. I swore to Johnny Behan that we didn't have nothin' to do with the train robbery up to Agua Zarca, but I don't *think* he believed me. Johnny has been sort of friendly to us fellers, but I got a feelin' he's beginnin' to look sort of sideways at us of late."

Ringo nodded without speaking. Brocius sat gazing southward, his eyes dream-filled.

"John," he said suddenly, "how'd you like to take a sashay way down into Mexico?"

Ringo slowly shook his head. "I'm afraid I wouldn't fit in down there, Bill," he declined. "No, I think I'll stick around here for a little while longer, then head east. I've still got some folks over East, you know, especially a sister I'd like awful well to see once more before I cash in my chips."

As Ringo spoke, a pale shadow seemed to flicker on his finely featured face, such a shadow as might fall from Death's advancing wing.

In Tombstone at about the same time, Jed Slone stabled his horse and made several purchases in various stores. He ate at the Can Can Restaurant and later, quite casually, entered the Oriental Saloon. After having a drink, he sat at a table and discussed recent happenings with Wyatt Earp. Naturally the talk got around to the stage robbery on the Benson Road.

"Haven't got any line on who else was in on that?" he asked.

Earp shook his lionlike head. "Nope," he replied. "The hellion who shot poor Porter is still swingin' a wide loop. I've a mighty good notion he was in on that train robbery up to Agua Zarca. The description of the jigger who was running things tallied mighty close with the one given by Phillips, the stage driver. Looks like it didn't take the devil long to get a new outfit together. A pity we had to do for all that bunch in the cabin. If we'd got one of 'em alive, we might have persuaded him to do some talkin' that would of given us a line on the rest of 'em."

Slone nodded agreement. "I've had a good idea that Mirandos Robles was a weak sister," he said. "Chances are he would have spilled his insides to save his neck. I don't think he was near as salty as his brother, Three-finger Jack. Believe you said *he* was a cowhand, didn't you? Wonder if he ever worked for Amado Fuentes? Fuentes has a lot of breeds on his payroll, I understand."

Earp pondered a moment. "Come to think of it, I believe he did," he said at length. "Yes, I'm sure I saw him in here with Fuentes' bunch a few times. But that was a while back. He was last workin' for the Bradded R, over to the east of Fuentes' holdin's. I had a feller over there askin' questions about him before we rode to the Whetstones. But he did work for Fuentes once. I'm sure of that now. Fuentes was here yesterday evenin'. Played cards in a big game till daylight. Must have dropped six or seven thousand dollars. He never wins, but I reckon he keeps on hopin'."

AFTER Slone returned to the ranchhouse, he had a talk with young Alfred Cushman.

"Al," he asked casually, "how come you to be down on the Lobo Trail that day I picked you up?"

"I was headin' for Harshow, over west of the mountains," Cushman replied. "I'd got word that old Mason Webster was plannin' to sell out his Flyin' V outfit and move back to California, where he has folks. I knew he had some mighty nice blooded stock on his place and figured I might make a deal with him for some of the critters."

"Plan to make the trip a considerable time before you set out?" Slone asked.

"Why, no," said Cushman. "I got the notice just the night before. Hadn't thought about it any before then."

"Who all knew you were goin'?" Slone asked.

"Nobody but Grandpa and Amado Fuentes, I reckon," Cushman answered. "Amado was at the ranchhouse that night. He thought Gypsy was comin' back from Tucson before she did and dropped around to see her. Why?"

"Oh, I was just wonderin'," Slone said. "And you said, I believe, that the hellions who shot you were holed up in the brush waitin', and came out after you passed?"

"That's right," Cushman nodded, looking a little perplexed.

"Funny, wasn't it, that the Galeyville bunch should happen to be way down there on the day you took that ride," Slone remarked. "They sure couldn't have known you planned to take it, and I don't reckon you ride down that way often. But it looks like they did know, and were waitin' for you. —Well, good night. Think I'll turn in. Got a hard day ahead tomorrow."

Cushman stared after him as he mounted the stairs, the perplexed look in his eyes deepening.

A few days later, early in the morning, Bill Jackson, wild with excitement, sought out Jed Slone.

"Boss, you were right," he exclaimed. "They do go south across Fuentes' holdin's. I had Hoskins and Brady down on the southeast pasture last night. They were keepin' tabs on a clump of about twelve prime beef critters. A while after midnight four jiggers came ridin' along. They rounded up them cows and headed 'em southeast, fast. Hoskins and Brady trailed along after 'em for a while, makin' sure they kept on headin' south. Then they figured they'd better hightail back and tell me what they saw. They did as you told 'em to and didn't try to tangle with the wideloopers, although Hoskins swore they could of dropped all four of 'em easy as fallin' off a slick log."

"I'm mighty glad they didn't," Slone replied.

"You are?" exclaimed the astonished Jackson. "In the name of Pete, why?"

"Because," Slone told him, "it would have been like choppin' the rattles off a sidewinder. You'd have the rattles, all right, but the snake would still be maverickin' around and all set to fang. What we want, Bill, is the whole snake, head and all, and not just the rattles and may-

be a hunk of his tail. We've got to figure a scheme to drop a loop on that snake, especially his head. But it will have to wait a while. Roundup starts day after tomorrow and until that's over, we'll be too busy for anything else. Meanwhile I'll do some thinkin' and see what we can figure out. Anyhow, we've got a lead at last, and that's more'n we've had up to now."

That evening Amado Fuentes rode up to the Cross G ranchhouse. He sat on the veranda and talked with Gypsy Cameron, nobody else being around at the moment.

"Gypsy," he said suddenly, "I'm asking you again to marry me. Will you?"

"No," the girl said firmly. "I won't."

There was a finality in her voice that narrowed Fuentes' eyes.

"Why not?" he asked, with dangerous quiet.

"Because," said Gypsy, "I'm going to marry somebody else."

FUENTES' powerful hands gripped the arms of his chair till his knuckles were white with the strain.

"Who?" he asked in the same ominously quiet voice.

Gypsy turned and looked him squarely in the eyes. "I'm going to marry Jed Slone," she said.

"That damned range tramp!" Fuentes exploded.

"He may have been a range tramp, as you call it," Gypsy blazed at him, "but he's a *man!*"

A look of malignant hatred convulsed Fuentes' countenance, wiping away all its marvelous beauty and leaving it hideous. Slowly he rose to his feet, towering over the seated girl. He glared down at her, his face drawn and haggard, with eyes of awful menace. Living eyes in a face of death. He spoke, the words falling from his lips like slow drops of blood from a death wound:

"You'll never marry him!"

For another instant he glared down at her. Then he turned on his heel, walked to his horse and mounted. Without a backward glance he rode away.

Gypsy gazed after him, her eyes wide, the pupils dilated, her hands tightly clasped as if in prayer. For the first time in her life, Gypsy Cameron was afraid.

CHAPTER XVII

Roundup Days

A MEETING was held at the Cross G ranchhouse that night. A meeting of all the ranch owners of the San Pedro Valley with the exception of Amado Fuentes who, to the surprise of everyone, did not show up. The meeting was for the purpose of arranging the details of the big beef roundup that would get under way two days later. Roberto Garcia, a genial host, and the biggest owner in the valley, presided at the meeting.

Although Jed Slone was the newest range boss in the section, his name was known to all present. Everybody had heard of him and had discussed his exploits. And when Garcia suggested that Slone be made roundup boss, there was not a dissenting voice.

"What about it, Slone?" somebody shouted. "Looks like you're sort of used to givin' orders, and havin' 'em listened to."

Jed Slone chuckled as he stood up. He ran a humorous glance over the assembly.

"Who ever heard of a cow critter listenin' to orders from anybody," he said, "but I'll do the best I can. I figure our best bet is to start our cow hunt down to the south. That way everything that drifts before us will work north onto the more open range where they'll be easier to work. I reckon our first holdin' spot should be about the middle pastures of the Bradded R, over east of Amado Fuentes' holdin's. We'll cut there, then we'll move north and make the main holdin' spot on the Cross G northeast range. We'll start up north and work down. That way we'll cover the most ground with the least ridin'. Anybody got any suggestions?"

Nobody had. It was agreed that Slone's plan was the best that could be devised. The meeting broke up after refreshments were served.

"Now I won't see you for another week," Gypsy complained as Slone kissed her good night. "Yes, I will, too! I'm going to ride with the outfit. Ah, you can't get rid of me easily, and you never will!"

"Won't never want to," Slone chuckled. "Say, what's the matter with you tonight, honey? You've been lookin' bothered all evenin'."

Gypsy gazed up at him, her wide eyes dark with trouble.

"Jed," she said, "I'm afraid—afraid for you. Amado Fuentes, he frightened me terribly this afternoon. He was here and again asked me to marry him. I told him I was going to marry you. The look on his face was awful. He looked like a madman, and the last thing he said before he rode away was, 'You'll never marry him!' Jed, he meant it. I believe he means you harm, if he gets the chance. You'll be careful, won't you, dear, for my sake?"

"Sure I'll be careful," Slone promised, patting her shoulder. "Don't you worry about Fuentes. He was just plumb disappointed, and I don't blame him. He'll get over it, though."

His cheerful confidence comforted the girl, but Slone was not as confident as he made out to be. He took Gypsy's warning much more seriously than he let her know, for reasons he alone knew.

Two days later the roundup got under way. Slone's first move was to select a number of assistants, trusted, efficient riders who could be depended on to carry out his orders to the letter. These aides were put in charge of groups of cowboys that were to scour the range thoroughly in search of vagrant cattle as well as large bunches. Slone's orders were obeyed unquestioningly. The word of a roundup boss is law on the range. Not even the biggest owner on the range would venture to question an order.

As the troops of cowhands rode over the range, they spread out, dividing into small parties and sub-dividing in twos and threes, or lone riders. It was each man's chore to hunt out all the cows on the ground over which he rode. Eventually the riders formed a moving, sinuous line some four or five miles long. This enveloping line drove before it all the cows combed out or met. The men at the ends of the great arc had to ride hard and fast to prevent rebellious steers from slipping out of the human corral. When the cows were shoved onto the holding spot they were a milling, bawling, uneasy herd.

THEN came the cutting out, the branding of unmarked critters, the segregating of various brands as they passed before the tally man. It was hard work, hot work, dangerous work. But the day was full of laughter, song and rough horseplay. The roundup was the culmination of long days, weeks, and months of routine work, and the sweating, swearing cowhands enjoyed every minute of it.

Jed Slone was everywhere at once, inspecting, advising, seeing to it that nobody neglected or sluffed over his chore.

"I don't want any mavericks roamin' around in the canyons or brakes when this cow work is over," he told the assembled cowboys in the beginning. "Mavericks mean slouchy combin'. I don't want any."

The cowhands looked the tall range boss over and decided there wouldn't be any.

Early in the work, Slone decided that Amado Fuentes' breed riders—most of them had at least half-Indian blood in their veins—were as good an outfit as he had ever contacted. Their methods more nearly approximated those of Texas than any he had as yet met with in Arizona. They were dark, silent men with hard, glittering eyes and inscrutable countenances. The force was rather smaller than he had expected from a spread the size of the FA, but their efficiency made up for their lack of numbers.

"I don't like 'em any too well, though," growled Bill Jackson when Slone mentioned the FA riders. "They're a plumb unsociable bunch. Stick together like a flock of sheep and don't hold no truck

with anybody else. Ain't no sense in 'em bein' so darn uppity. Reckon they caught it from Fuentes. He always acts like he's got the world by the tail and a down-hill pull. Don't see much of him durin' this work. Seems to be in a bad temper about somethin' or other. Reckon they must have took him over heavy at cards of late in the Oriental. I hear tell he's keepin' a flock of jiggers rich up there. Feller who can't play cards had ought to know better than to try, but that sort never learns and keeps on tryin' so long as they can rake up a peso."

A few days after the roundup moved north and the main holding spot was established on the Cross G northeast range, Jed Slone and Bill Jackson were riding in the shadow of the hills to the west, which were slashed with canyons and gorges that provided good hide-outs for cows with independent notions. Along toward the middle of the afternoon they approached a gloomy, narrow canyon with a small stream washing its south wall.

"Holy Pete!" Jackson suddenly exclaimed. "Look at all them tracks. Must be a whole herd squattin' in that hole."

Slone nodded. "Good grass in there," he said. "And water, and mighty little brush and rocks. Trees here and there for shade, too. Got the look of a prime hole-up. We should root out quite a bunch from there. Two men can handle the job. Gulch is narrow and the goin' looks good, but I don't much like the looks of that bronc of yours, Bill. Looks like he's strained a shoulder. Limpin', too."

"Reckon he'll hold out the rest of the day," Jackson replied. "You goin' to work your saddle horse in there? Takin' chances with his legs, feller. I see badger holes around."

"Reckon Blaze can take care of himself," Slone replied cheerfully. "He's as good a cuttin' and ropin' horse as there is in the business, though I don't use him for work much. Looks to be a pretty clear track runnin' up the center of the canyon. We'll keep to that as much as we can, and miss the holes in the softer grounds."

Jackson nodded and they rode up the canyon, which was comparatively free from growth but rather crooked, winding this way and that, with sheer rock walls towering high and rendering the narrow gorge somewhat shadowy.

Jackson and Slone rode on steadily, not looking back. They did not see the two dark-faced men who stole furtively into the canyon on foot, padding along with easy strides until they were nearly a mile inside the gorge. One carried a thick coil of rope over his shoulder, two sixty-foot twines securely spliced together. Between two stout trees that grew on either side of the track winding up the canyon and about a hundred feet apart they busied themselves with the rope. Then they stole back down the gorge as silently as they had come.

SLONE and Jackson were about two miles up the canyon, taking it easy, for it had been a hard day and they desired to breathe their horses, when Bill suddenly jerked up his head. He held it cocked in an attitude of listening.

"What the hell?" he said wonderingly. "Listen to them critters beller! What's wrong up there, anyhow? A fight between two bulls? Funny. This ain't love-makin' time of the year for cow critters."

From up the canyon came a chorus of bawls and bleats, then a low rumble as of pounding hoofs. The two cowboys reined in, listening intently.

The racket became louder, the bellowing took on a frantic note.

"Say!" exclaimed Slone. "Them perambulatin' beefsteaks are movin', and movin' this way! Look out, feller! Something's going on, and it don't sound good to me."

He cast an anxious glance at Jackson's slightly lame horse. Jed Slone didn't know what had caused it, but he had a pretty good notion as to what was going on up the canyon. His grip tightened on the reins and he tensed in the saddle.

"Get set!" he yelled at his companion "I've a notion we're goin' to have some ridin' to do! That sounds a hell of a lot like a stampede to me!"

bone and muscle crashed into the great roan and hurled him forward. He floundered, slipped on the stones, all but went down.

It was a tense moment. Once let the passing cows close the narrow opening in front and in another moment, horse and men would be lifeless red pulp beneath the churning hoofs. Slone jerked his gun and blazed away at the cows on either side. They veered away from the flashes, the booming reports and the hammering of the heavy slugs. One or two went down, the others piling up on top of them.

The instant's respite gave Blaze his chance. He shot through the closing opening, thudding against the frenzied animals on either side, knocked a veering cow head over heels and, with Slone's second gunshot that he managed by a miracle of agility, thundering and flashing, smashed ahead of the herd.

Down the canyon Blaze tore, paying no heed to the double weight he carried. He was five hundred yards out on the open prairie before Slone could pull him to a gasping halt.

Slone glanced back. The herd was scattering in every direction, swiftly losing speed as the animals recovered from their fright.

"Well," the Cross G range boss remarked cheerfully to nobody but himself, "we got 'em out of the canyon, anyhow. Easier than combin' and drivin' for a couple of hours. But I reckon we'll just pass up that method next time, if we have anything to say about it. Thank God, Bill seems to be coming around. He must have a head like a cannon-ball."

JACKSON was moving and groaning. He opened his eyes and glared around dazedly, having not the least notion where he was or how he got there.

"What the blue blazin' hell?" he croaked.

"Take it easy," Slone cautioned. "Everything's under control. Get your breath back."

Jackson swore some more, his mind clearing, understanding taking charge of his stunned faculties at last.

"So you got me out, eh?" he mumbled. "The last thing I remember was flyin' through the air. Much obliged, feller."

"Don't thank me," Slone replied. "Thank that poor busted-neck horse of yours lying back there. If it hadn't been for that strained shoulder of his, we'd have been ridin' neck-and-neck, and we'd both have gone down."

"But how in tarnation did it happen?" demanded the bewildered cowboy.

"I'll tell you," Slone replied. "But first, do you think you can sit up by yourself? If you can, straddle on behind me. You're a pretty hefty load to pack like a baby."

"I'll make it," said Jackson. He slid to the ground, weaving a little, and got up behind Slone.

"Now tell me what happened?" he requested.

"It was just a nice little try to get both of us," Slone explained. "And if I hadn't shot you ahead a bit, so I could keep an eye on that lame cayuse and act accordin', it would have worked out. That stampede didn't just happen—it was set by somebody who drove those cows up that gulch. There was at least two hundred of the critters, more than ever would have strayed in there. No wonder we saw so many tracks at the mouth of the canyon. After we rode in, some hellions slipped in and tied a rope across the trail, between two trees. Your horse hit the rope and turned a flip-flop, naturally. I saw the twine just in time and sent Blaze over it. Yeah, a nice try."

Jackson swore a stream of appalling oaths. "That damnation to hell Galeyville bunch!" he yelled. "The nerve of them sidewinders, slippin' down here to pull a stunt like that!"

Slone shook his head. "Wrong, Bill," he said. "It wasn't the Galeyville bunch this time. They would never have taken such a chance, with men ridin' all over the range. They would have been spotted, sure. That trap was set by men who had a right to be here, men nobody would pay any attention to."

"You mean one of our outfit?"

Around a bend in the canyon, a couple of hundred yards farther on, suddenly bulged a horrific vision of clashing horns, tossing heads and wildly rolling eyes. A solid mass of cattle blocked the gorge from side to side, smashing the brush as if it were dry grass, sending the stones flying under pounding hoofs, sweeping everything before it.

"What the hell started that?" yelled Jackson.

"Never mind what started it!" Slone roared back. "Ride, you jughead! Do you want to be sausage meat?"

They whirled their horses and sped down the canyon. The horses didn't need to be told to go away from there. Few things terrify a range horse like being in front of a stampede, especially when such a stampede is held in a compact mass by unclimbable rock walls. The mounts were in full stride after the first frantic bound forward.

"You set the pace!" Slone shouted to Jackson. "Keep ahead of me. I don't like the looks of your bronc's shoulder. He's limpin' worse already! Keep ahead, and if things get bad, I'll try and slow 'em up a bit with my gun!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Ahead of Death

DOWN the canyon the two cowboys fled, Jackson about twenty paces in the lead, Slone holding Blaze in and casting frequent glances over his shoulder. Neither man was particularly worried for, barring an unforeseen accident or the chance of Jackson's horse suddenly going altogether lame, there was little danger of the maddened cows overtaking them. The thoroughly scared horses would take care of that in a satisfactory manner. And the track down the center of the canyon, though rough and stone strewn, was good enough going for the sure-footed cayuses.

As Slone had remarked when they started up the gorge, there were no holes in the trail, although the badgers had been busy enough on either side. Also, the stupid mild-eyed animals behind them might at any moment recover from their senseless fright and start milling.

They covered a mile, drawing slightly away from the stampede. Jackson was favoring his mount and not trying to get the utmost in speed from him.

And then happened the utterly unpredictable. Bill Jackson's horse suddenly shot through the air as if he had taken unto himself wings. He turned a complete flipflop and crashed to earth. Jackson was flung over his head and struck the rocky trail with terrible force. He writhed an instant and lay still.

Slone let out a yelp of consternation and amazement. What had caused that terrific fall? Barely in time his eyes, sweeping the trail ahead, spotted the humming rope drawn taut from tree-trunk to tree-trunk and spanning the trail at a height of about two feet.

"Take it, feller, take it!" he roared, jerking Blaze's head up.

Blaze took it, bounding high into the air, clearing the twine by a good three feet. He came down on clashing irons almost on top of Jackson's motionless body. Jackson's horse also lay motionless, its head twisted around at a horrid angle. The fall had broken its neck and killed it intantly.

Slone left the saddle in a streaking dive. He scooped Jackson's body from the ground.

But Jackson was a huge man. He weighed a good thirty pounds more than Slone himself, who tipped the scales at two hundred. Mounting with the limp, unconscious man in his arms taxed even the big Texan's strength. Precious seconds were lost before he finally managed to fork Blaze. And the stampeding herd was right on top of them!

Blaze screamed with rage and anger as a horn raked his flank. Before he could get under way, the veering, stumbling cows of the front rank were streaming past on either side. A moving mass of

"That's right," Slone replied. "A saltier bunch than the Galeyville outfit, and with a man headin' 'em who has more brains in a minute than Curly Bill Brocius has in a week."

"Who the devil is it?" Jackson demanded, embellishing the question with more profanity.

"I'll talk to you more about it a little later," Slone evaded. "What we want to do right now is get to the holdin' spot and the chuckwagons and look after your head. You've got a lump on it the size of a turkey egg, and it's bleedin'. Wonder it didn't bust your skull."

"My skull don't bust easy," Jackson growled. "But somebody else's will if I manage to get within shootin' distance of them sidewinders."

"By the way, Bill," Slone observed, "don't say anything about what happened today, just yet. Just say your horse fell with you. We'll slide back up there and get your saddle tomorrow, or what those cows left of it."

"Anything you say," grunted Jackson. "There's the wagons now."

Pedro, the Cross G cook, treated Jackson's cut head with a liberal application of horse liniment that burned like fire and drew remarks from Bill that tinged the air with a distinct aroma of sulphur. A handkerchief was tied about the injured head and Jackson declared himself as good as new.

By the time the surgical operations were completed, supper was ready, and a sore head certainly did not impair Jackson's appetite. After that he procured another horse and saddle and, with Slone, rode out to inspect the various cut-outs. At some distance from the camp they pulled up, rolled cigarettes, and lounged comfortably in the hulls. Jackson looked expectant.

"Yes, Bill," Slone remarked, "as I told you before, we're up against a bad outfit with a man at the head of it who has plenty of moss on his horns."

"Who in blazin' hell is it?" demanded Jackson.

"Amado Fuentes," Slone said quietly.

CHAPTER XIX

The Trap

BILL JACKSON'S eyes and mouth opened, his jaw sagged. He stared at Jed Slone as if convinced that the Cross G range boss had suddenly gone absolutely loco.

"Wh-what!" he stuttered. Amado Fuentes!"

""Right," Slone said. "Amado Fuentes, with his hair dyed black and a rag over his face. Amado Fuentes, who held up the Benson stage and killed a guard. Who robbed the N.M. and A. express car and killed, or helped kill, three men. Amado Fuentes, who has been liftin' our cows and runnin' 'em across his holdings to Mexico. Amado Fuentes, who shot Al Cushman in the back."

"No! Can't be!"

"I'm positive," Slone said.

This was the last straw. Jackson felt as if he were losing his grip on his intellect.

"Why in the name of all tarnation's red blazes would he want to shoot Cushman?" he gasped.

"Because," Slone said quietly, "Alfred Cushman is Roberto Garcia's heir. When Garcia dies, the Cross G goes to Cushman. With Cushman out of the way, the ranch would go to Gypsy Cameron, and Fuentes had it all planned to marry Gypsy after Cushman was out of the way."

"And if you're right about that," Jackson observed grimly, "you're in an almighty bunch of trouble yourself. It's up to Fuentes to get *you* out of the way, too, if he hopes to go through with his scheme. Everybody knows how Miss Gypsy feels about you."

"Yes," Slone agreed, "and we had a little sample of how he feels this afternoon."

"Holy Pete!" Jackson ejaculated. "As if it wasn't enough for you to have Bill Brocius and his Galeyville hellions on your tail!"

"Makes things sort of interestin'," Slone

commented with a dry smile.

"And you're sure you're right about Fuentes?" Jackson persisted.

"Yes, I am," Slone replied. "And I'll tell you why. Take the Cushman shootin' to begin with. Only Fuentes and Garcia knew Cushman was goin' to take that ride. Cushman decided to take it only the night before he set out. It would be ridiculous to think that the Galeyville bunch was holed up waitin' for Cushman on the Lobo Trail. They couldn't possibly have known he would be there when he was. Bill Brocius has plenty of brains and savvy, but I doubt if one of his gifts is readin' feller's minds."

"That sounds bad, whatever it is," said Jackson, shaking his head, "though I can't say I savvy. If it's plumb snake-blooded this readin' minds is, I wouldn't be surprised if Brocius has got it. Is it catchin'?"

Slone chuckled and went on:

"They didn't just run onto Cushman by accident. The drygulchers were holed up and waitin' for him. They let him ride past, then threw down on him. When they passed me a little later, I noticed the jigger ridin' in front was a heap taller than the others. I didn't get a look at their faces. All I could see was eyes under hatbrims. That pattern has followed through all the way. A tall, black-haired jigger runnin' things on the Benson Road, and at the express car robbery. On the Benson road, the hellions dressed up in yellow shirts, to throw suspicion on me. Brocius would never have done a thing like that. He's too direct. It took a subtle, clever mind to think that one out.

"Just as soon as I took over here Fuentes realized it meant trouble for him and his schemes. Chances are he couldn't guess what I had up my sleeve. He'd heard about me below the Line, of course, and an owlhoot always figures anybody else who acts out of the ordinary is an owlhoot, too. Likely Fuentes figured I was trying to horn in on his little game and feather my own nest.

"Also he may have been worried about what happened on the Lobo Trail. For all he knew, I saw the whole thing and maybe got a pretty good look at him when they rode past. Might be just bidin' my time, or holdin' it over him to force him to make a deal, sooner or later. He would think that way."

JACKSON nodded his understanding. Slone paused to roll a cigarette.

"My row with Brocius and his bunch in Tombstone played right into Fuentes' hands," he went one, as he lit the quirly. "He knew the Brocius bunch was out to get me, so he shoved in his two pesos' worth, too. He was too smart to try the yellow shirt dodge a second time, as a dumber jigger might have done. When he realized Brocius was hard on my tail, I figure he sort of sat back and waited, hopin' they'd down me for him. But when he learned Gypsy had promised to marry me, I reckon he got sort of jumpy. So he made a try himself this afternoon, the sort of a cute scheme a jigger like him would work out. Begin to see how it all ties up?"

Jackson swore till the air about his head took on a slight bluish tinge.

"The cussed son of a horned toad!" he finished up. "Say, I see now why you pocketed that bottle of hair dye that night in the cabin at Frenchy's Canyon!"

Slone nodded. "Tried it out on my own red mop," he said. "Found out it *was* the same stuff I'd learned about from my Indian friends. Water don't affect it, like I told you, but plenty of soap gets it off easy enough. I wanted to be sure about that. And somethin' else to remember, Bill. Fuentes is a gambler and he loses plenty, more'n he could possible get through the operation of his spread. Al Cushman swears, too, that he had half a dozen gals on the string, and that takes money. And of course his men live high. Keeps him scratchin' to keep his head above water. I aim to play on that angle and try to set a trap for him. He sure got together a choice bunch of hellions, all right. The sort of breed that seems to get all the bad and none of the good from both races."

Jackson agreed. "I've known some

plumb fine fellers who had white and Injun blood," he said, "but I've known some others that would eat off the same plate with a snake, though I've a good idea if the Fuentes bunch reached for a bite, the snake would move away.—What about the trap?"

"We'll talk that over after the round-up's finished," Slone told him. "There'll be a buyer here tomorrow to take over most of the Cross G cut, and most of Claborn's Bradded R stuff. Claborn offered to run both herds to the shipping pens, takin' along two or three of our boys to lend a hand. But we'll have a nice bunch of stuff left that Garcia figures on holdin' in close corral for a few days before disposin' of 'em."

The round-up was completed the following day. That afternoon, Garcia carried into his ranchhouse a satchel containing more than thirty thousand dollars in gold. The remainder of the cut, a large herd of prime beefs, was driven south. For Slone, to the surprise of the hands, had decided to hold them in close herd on the southeast pasture.

The pasture afforded excellent grass and water but was a long way from the ranchhouse.

That night, Slone held a conference with Garcia and Alfred Cushman. Old Roberto was thunderstruck at Slone's revelation, but was forced to admit that the evidence Slone laid before him was conclusive.

Young Cushman, on the other hand, evinced little surprise.

"I always told you, Grandpa, that Amado wasn't to be trusted," he said.

"I know, I know," sighed Garcia, "but it is terrible to think of one's kinsman being guilty of such things."

"Reckon Abel felt about the same way about his brother," Slone remarked. "But Cain turned out to be plumb snake-blooded. Happens in the best of families, suh."

Garcia sadly nodded his white head. "About the trap you intend to set?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure Fuentes will rise to the bait," Slone said. "That herd on the southeast pasture stands for a lot of *dinero,* money I think he needs pretty bad about now. It'll be a temptation, I figure, that he won't be able to resist once he sees how easy it will be to run off those cows. If he does make a try for them, we'll have him in our loop, with everything proved conclusive against him."

"Very well," agreed the old man, "but I insist that I be present."

"And that goes for me, too," said Cushman.

"Well, I can't very well argue with the boss," Slone said, "but I wish you two would stay out of it. You haven't got your strength back altogether yet, Al."

THE first night on the pasture, the herd was guarded by a number of the Cross G hands, for Slone was taking no chances on an unexpectedly swift raid, although he did not anticipate one. The day following, however, the herders were reduced to three. Slone chose three young fellows who had something of a reputation for wildness, and gave them specific instructions as to their behavior.

"I'm pretty sure the hellions will be keepin' tabs on the herd," he told them, "so it's up to you fellers to play your hands mighty careful. No slip-ups. Don't reckon there will be, though. All you'll have in that bottle is cold tea. I'm takin' no chances."

"Couldn't it be flavored just a mite?" sighed one thirsty waddie.

"No flavorin'," Slone vetoed. "But if this chore is handled right, you can all go on a bust in Tombstone that they'll talk about when they're trippin' over their whiskers."

All day the three cowboys were on the job, but as evening approached, one rode off to the north. He was back within less than an hour, however. Soon a bottle began passing from hand to hand. A little later, singing began, or what apparently was intended for it. The cattle looked surprised, and a trifle resentful, but decided to make the best of it and returned to grazing.

Just as dusk was falling, a conference was held over the empty bottle. Most of the cows were lying down now, and the others showed no disposition to stray. The three cowboys rode off together, embracing in drunken affection, headed north.

But as full dark descended, and just before the moon rose, shadowy figures stole in from the west and concealed themselves in a dense thicket from which the sleeping herd was plainly visible.

Slowly the hours passed, and nothing happened. Midnight came and went. Jed Slone and his tense companions crouched in the thicket, peering and listening. They saw nothing but the lonely stars, heard nothing but the rumblings of the contented herd and the whispering of the night wind through the grasses.

Then abruptly they did hear something —a patter of hoofs drawing steadily nearer.

"Get set, boys!" whispered an excited cowboy. "Here they come!"

But Jed Slone listened, with a darkening face, to the beat of hoofs, growing louder.

"Wrong," he said. "That horse is comin' from the north, and comin' fast. *Now* what in hell had happened?"

CHAPTER XX

Triumph of Right

QUICKLY enough they found out. The horseman loomed gigantic in the darkness. He let out a whoop and raced for the thicket, leaping from his mount's back while the cayuse was in full stride.

It was Pedro, the old Yaqui cook. His eyes were wild, he was gasping as if he had run the whole distance from the ranchhouse. There was blood on his face. He broke into a torrent of incoherent Spanish.

"Hold it, feller," Slone snapped. "Get a grip on yourself, talk slow, and in English."

"The gold!" panted Pedro. "They take. They take *la senorita* also."

Slone seized him by the shoulder with a grip that left its five purple spots for days.

"Who you talking about, Pedro?" he demanded.

"Amado Fuentes—may he burn in *el infierno* forever. He and his men rode up to the ranchhouse and entered quickly. I heard the noise and came from my bed. One struck me down. Others opened the safe and took the gold. I heard *la senorita* scream. Amado Fuentes appeared, carrying her. They mounted her on a horse, and rode away."

A torrent of curses greeted Pedro's story. Old Roberto Garcia called on the saints. Al Cushman called on devils. Jed Slone stilled the tumult.

"Which way did they ride, Pedro?" he asked, his voice quiet but his face bleak as granite, his eyes cold as an ice-capped mountain peak.

"They ride south, on the Lobo Trail," Pedro replied.

"Come on!" thundered Bill Jackson. "What we waitin' for? After the sidewinders! We'll cut across and catch 'em up in two shakes of a dead calf's tail."

He was running for his horse when Slone stopped him.

"Wait," he said. "They let you see them ride off, Pedro? Didn't even tie you up?"

The taciturn Yaqui nodded. The cowboys were chafing with impatience, but Slone again demanded silence.

"Pedro," he said, "you know my boys who are workin' for the Diamond A over east of Claborn's Bradded R, my *Dorados*. Ride to the Diamond A as fast as you can. Tell the boys I said to guard the Border. They can learn if Fuentes and his bunch crossed by way of the Lobo. If he did, tell 'em I said to foller him until they are old, if necessary. They can get plenty of help down below the Line, if they need it. Hightail!"

Without a word, the Yaqui put spurs to his horse and thundered off.

"And now," Slone said quietly, "we're ridin' too. I don't believe Fuentes took

the Lobo. That's why he let Pedro see him leave, figurin' we'd be fooled by his story and go skalleyhootin' down the Lobo."

"But where in thunderation did he go, then?" Jackson asked helplessly, as they got under way.

"Remember that canyon where the Brocius outfit tried to drygulch me?" asked Slone. "That canyon pierces the mountains, east to west—I'm plumb sure of it. The way is possible to horses. I figure Fuentes turned off as soon as he was out of sight of the ranchhouse, backtracked and headed for that canyon. I believe we can catch him up before he gets clean away. Chances are he'll head west and down into the wild country of Lower California. Let him once get across the Border over there and we'd never run him down.

"We thought we were outsmartin' him, but he outsmarted us. Our little scheme never fooled him for a minute. He knew, though, that the jig was up and he'd have to light out. So he grabbed the *dinero* at the ranchhouse, grabbed Gypsy and hightailed. So we make for the canyon. Anyhow, my *Dorados* will guard the Border south of here till they hear from me. Sift sand and maybe we can catch him before he leaves the canyon. I'm hopin' he'll stop over at the west end, hole up and wait for night again. He can't make it through there before daylight."

IN SILENCE, with loose reins, the Cross G outfit rode. Just as the false dawn was fleeting ghostlike across the sky, they reached the foothills of the Huachucas. Here they turned north.

With the plainsman's acute sense of distance and direction, Slone found the canyon mouth despite the black dark hour before the dawn. They turned into the gorge and rode on, more slowly now, for the going was rough. Up and up climbed the faint track, winding and turning as the gorge changed direction, but always holding to a steadily westward trend.

"Keep your ears and your eyes open," Slone warned. "If we run onto the sidewinders holed up and waitin' for us, it'll be just too bad. Use your noses, too. I'm bankin' on the chance that they'll make camp somewhere around the west end of this hole and cook breakfast. Steady now—we're dippin' over the crest. Should be level goin' for a while, then the west sag will begin."

Overhead the stars dwindled and finally winked out. A pale gray replaced the velvety blue-black of the heavens. Swiftly it changed to steel, warmed with a rosy glow. Objects began to be visible. Their outlines quickly became clear and sharp-edged in the strengthening light. Purple shadows still curdled in the canyon's depths, but the upper reaches flashed with a pulsing radiance. The crests of the cliffs burned with coppery fire as the sun climbed over the edge of the world and flooded the shallow bowl of the sky with a golden glory.

Writhing between stands of chaparral the trail flowed on. It dipped over the lip of the far slope and dropped steeply downward. The hard-riding group had a glimpse, far beyond, of the rangeland west of the mountains.

"I smell smoke!" Bill Jackson suddenly exclaimed.

"You're right," agreed Slone. "They've made camp! Take it easy, now. We'll light off in another couple of minutes and slide forward on foot. When we sight 'em, we'll hit 'em and hit 'em hard. We're goin' to have a fight on our hands. They'll never give up without one."

"*El Dios* grant that Gypsy will not be harmed," quavered old Roberto. "Flying lead plays no favorites."

Slone's face was drawn and haggard, but his voice was steady when he replied:

"She'll be better dead than in that devil's hands. We'll have to chance it. All right—dismount. Leave the horses in this cleared patch. There's a spring comin' from under the cliff. They won't stray."

With the utmost caution, the compact group crept forward. The smell of burning wood grew steadily stronger, mingled with the aroma of boiling coffee and frying bacon. Soon they could hear voices,

speaking in Spanish and English. They left the trail and slid through the growth, silently as Indians, pausing every few steps to peer and listen.

The stealthy approach over the rough ground and through the thick growth was nerve-wracking. A displaced stone drew forth breathed curses. A sharply snapping branch set pulses to pounding. Once the shrill neigh of a horse that apparently heard something froze the posse rigid and motionless for crawling minutes before they dared proceed once more.

A suddenly raised voice beyond the bushes sent hands streaking to holsters. Behind a final fringe of thicket they halted and surveyed the scene ahead.

A camp had been made in a shallow clearing where a spring bubbled forth. The assembled FA hands were busy around the fire. Over to one side sat Amado Fuentes. Gypsy Cameron sat facing him, her face white, but head held high. Fuentes appeared to be urging something in low tones. Gypsy looked at him scornfully, not deigning to reply.

"I'll take Fuentes," Slone breathed. "Don't anybody else crack down on him. It's a terrible chance to take at best. You fellers concentrate on the bunch around the fire. Don't expect any mercy if they get the best of you. All right, let's go! Get as close as you can before you cut loose."

RACING Cross G hands were halfway across the clearing and within easy gun range before the group about the fire realized what was happening. The cliffs rocked and quivered to the roar of six-shooters as the cowboys poured a volley into the huddle about the fire.

The outlaws, taken unaware and caught off-balance, never had a chance. But they fought back with grim courage even as they fell. Screams, curses, cries of agony and the thunder of the guns swelled in an awful pandemonium. Red flashes stabbed through the powder fog, the scattered embers spiraled blue smoke as bodies fell across them. Big Bill Jackson's roaring bellow whooped encouragement to his fellows as he pulled trigger with both hands.

As Slone bounded toward Amado Fuentes, gun in hand, the man came to his feet with catlike grace. A sweep of his long arm and he had Gypsy hugged close to his breast. The girl writhed and struggled as he fired over her shoulder at the weaving, ducking Slone, but his iron strength held her helpless.

Slone held his fire as he zigzagged forward. He dared not shoot until he was so close a miss would be impossible. He felt the hot burn of a bullet across his cheek. Another nicked his shoulder. A third whirled his hat sideways on his head.

Fuentes gripped the girl tight and took deliberate aim. Slone turned sideward as he pressed trigger. The bullet scorched along his ribs. He whirled to face Fuentes, his gun muzzle jutting out. Fuentes was going backward toward where his splendid bay horse stood waiting.

"Hold up, Slone!" he thundered. "You'll plug her if you pull trigger!"

"Reckon not," Slone hurled back at him as he did pull trigger.

Gypsy reeled to one side with a gasping cry. One of Fuentes' glaring eyes went blank. He rose on his tiptoes, his arms dropping to his sides, his gun clattering on the stones. Even as Gypsy fell in a huddled heap, he pitched forward on his face and was still.

Slone raced to the fallen girl. She lay in a pathetic little huddle, her face dead-white, her lashes closed. Slone clasped her in his arms, his heart pounding with awful dread. But even as he raised her, the big blue eyes opened and she gazed dazedly into his face. Another instant and her arms were clasped about his neck and she was sobbing convulsively against his breast.

From across the clearing came Bill Jackson's voice roaring profanity.

"I'd ought to belly-shoot every cursed one of you, you damned to hell snake-blooded frazzled-ends of a misspent life!" he was storming at four cringing men whose hands were high in the air and whose lips were babbling incoherent prayers for mercy.

"Hold it, Bill!!" Slone shouted, straightening up with Gypsy in his arms. "Hold it! We're not cold-blooded killers. Tie 'em up and let the law take care of 'em. They'll look good, dancin' on nothing. Did we lose anybody?"

"A few nicks and punctures," Jackson called back as his punchers moved forward to secure the prisoners. "Don't reckon anybody will cash in, though Hoskins and Blaine are hit kind of hard. I'll fix 'em up. You are right? And you, Miss Gypsy? See Fuentes is sleepin' purty sound. Reckon he's tellin' the devil a plumb put-out yarn about us right now.—Suppose we get that fire goin' again and cook somethin' to eat. All this gun slingin' made me hungry. Then we'll herd them horned toads to Tombstone and hand Johnny Behan a chore to do. . . ."

TOMBSTONE seethed with excitement when the news got around. Jed Slone's name was on every lip. Interested and admiring eyes followed the tall, rugged-faced man who had smashed the Fuentes outlaw band, and because of whom, it was said, Curly Bill Brocius and his most trusted lieutenants had quietly left the country.

When the formalities at the courthouse were completed, Slone, with Gypsy, Roberto Garcia and Alfred Cushman repaired to the Can Can Restaurant for something to eat. Outside the courthouse, cheerful citizens were already building a gallows wide enough and strong enough to accommodate five men. The trial verdict the following day was a foregone conclusion.

After the empty dishes were cleared away and cigarettes were rolled, Roberto Garcia smiled at his table companions.

"And now," he said, "we might as well discuss some material matters. I guess, Jed, it is up to you and Gypsy to take over the FA Ranch and run it. Gypsy, Alfred and I are Amado Fuentes' only heirs, so the holdings naturally revert to us."

"Suits me fine," Slone replied. "Maybe Gypsy and I will be able to buy you and Al out after a while."

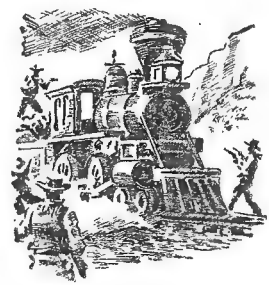
"Nothing would please me more," said Garcia, "and you can rest assured that the price we ask will be nominal."

Al Cushman nodded agreement.

"And now, Gypsy," said Slone, his face serious but his blue eyes twinkling, "I understand there's quite a few preachers maverickin' around in Tombstone. Reckon it's up to us to drop a loop on one. I figure it's about time I saw you again like I did the first time."

"How's that?" Gypsy asked, falling into the trap.

"In your nightgown!"



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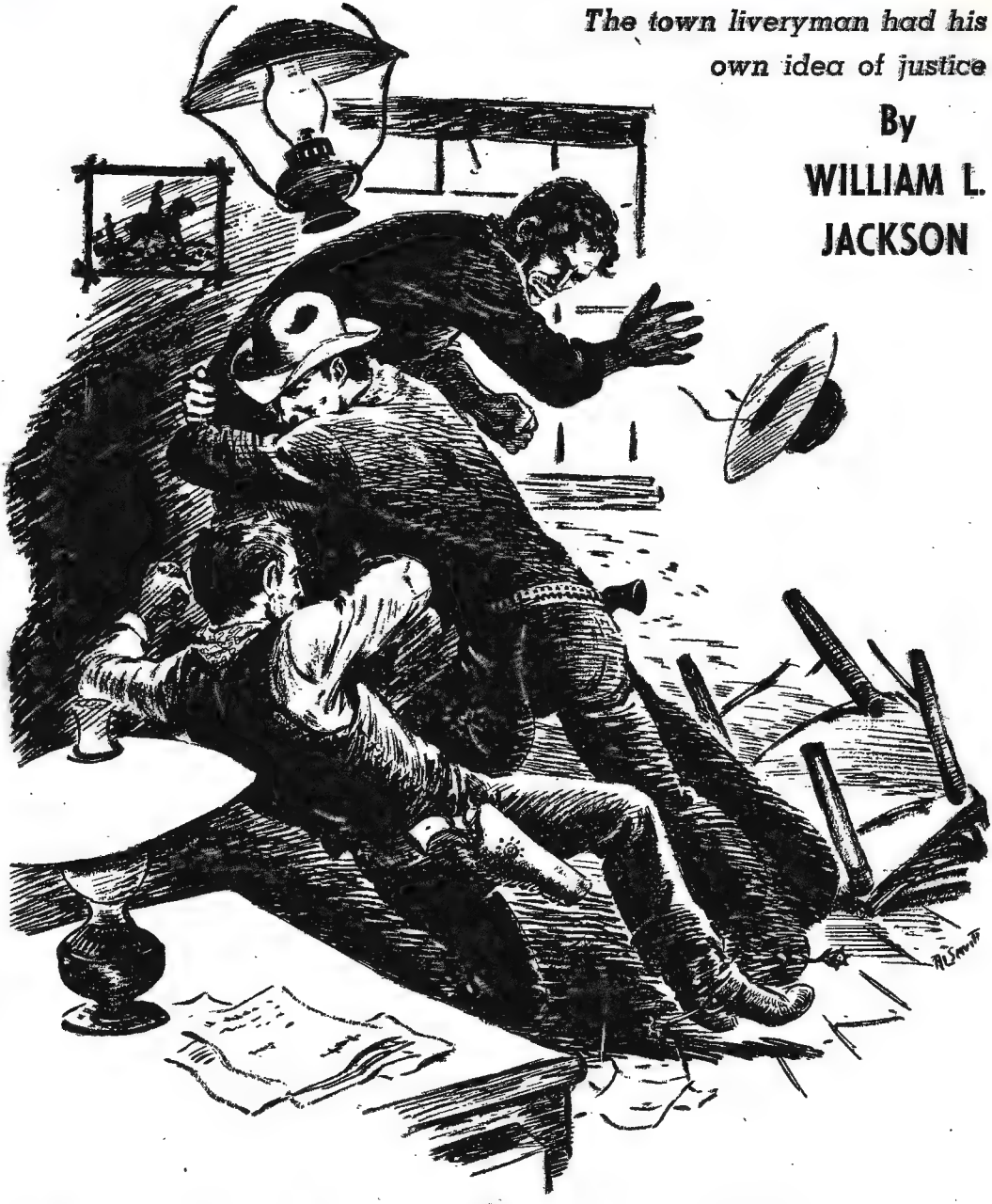

Run Him Out

A COWHAND rode in late Friday afternoon with the news that a Bar Y rider had been killed by a nester, and the story traveled through Two Fork like a hot summer wind. Harry Martin heard an exaggerated version from an idler in front of the livery stable. He agreed when this man said he wouldn't want to be in the nester's shoes, but he did not share the loafer's laughter.

She hesitated. "I'm not sure yet. But I'm glad you're not fighting each other any more."

An uncomfortable feeling came over the room, but it was broken suddenly by the sound of a team racing down the street. Roark stepped to the doorway as the wagon rolled up and stopped in a cloud of dust. The driver was George Blanchard, a rancher down near Lost Canyon, and his shouts were bringing heads out of doorways up and down the street.

"There's been another fire!" he called hoarsely to Roark. "Old Pop Simmons' place down by the canyon!"

Roark stiffened. Pop Simmons had let it be known that he wasn't selling to the Southwest Ranching Company or anybody else. Matt Jordan was already outside getting on his horse. He called impatiently as Roark stood in the doorway, thinking.

"Let's go, Roark! If we get the fire fighters together in time, we might be able to stop it."

Roark spoke to Blanchard. "Where did the fire start? Down on the canyon side of Pop's place?"

Blanchard thought for a moment. "That's right. Down by the pass somewhere. It couldn't have been started more than half an hour ago."

That settled it for Roark. He turned to Jordan and said, "Blanchard can gather up the fire fighters. Whoever started it will have to make their getaway down the canyon. You take the north pass and I'll take the south. With some luck we might be able to bottle them up."

Jordan stared for a moment, as if he thought it couldn't be done. Then he nodded. "Right. I'll see you at the canyon."

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CHAPTER III

Canyon Battle

ROARK had only a moment to look back as he swung up to the saddle. Vivian Hassalt stood in the doorway of the office, her face tight with worry. But Roark couldn't tell if the worry was for him or for Jordan. He put iron to his horse and took after his deputy, veering a little to the right toward the south pass.

As he passed the south border of Pop Simmons' place he saw the gray smoke rolling up lazily in the thin morning air, and just the sight of it made hot anger seethe in him. Roark reached the head of the pass, where the brush country broke suddenly into giant arroyos and gullies. There were no riders in sight, and Roark felt a breath of hope. Maybe Stark and his men had stayed around to make sure their fire was going good. If that had happened, either Roark or Jordan had a chance to catch them red-handed.

There was a quick beat of hoofs as Roark headed his horse between the high canyon walls, and a moment later one of the riders nosed around the bend in full sight. The gunman was more startled than Roark. He pulled his horse up suddenly, wheeled, and almost went down. Two quick shots thundered in the canyon, and Roark left the saddle, hitting the hard ground on all fours.

The only thing he could do now was to find some kind of protection and try to keep the gunmen boxed in until help came. Roark scrambled up the rocky wall until he found a boulder big enough to hide behind. He unlimbered his .44, not expecting to hit anything, but hoping to make the gunmen a little self-conscious.

It seemed to work. Roark could hear horses pulled up suddenly around the bend, and then the sound of boots whacking the packed clay, as the men scrambled for what cover they could find. Roark took a few seconds to look things over.

It wasn't good, but it could have been worse. The gunmen were filtering around the bend now in quick little runs from boulder to boulder. With some luck Roark thought he could keep them pinned down until Jordan came up from behind to make it a two-front war.

There were about five of them down there, Roark guessed. He put two more bullets into the middle of them, and that made them stop and think. Then a high-velocity bullet whanged the side of Roark's boulder and went whining and moaning up toward a million miles of glass sky. That wasn't good. Somebody down there had a saddle gun, and Roark's .44 couldn't compete with a rifle.

ANOTHER slug from the saddle gun slammed against Roark's rock in the exact place where his head had been a moment before. The man was good—a sharpshooter. Roark risked taking another look around the other side of the rock. He saw Sharpshooter scampering from one boulder to another, trying to better his position. Roark didn't like that. If Sharpshooter managed to get around on the other side of him, they'd have him boxed in. The hunter would be caught in his own trap. Roark reloaded and waited.

Then suddenly a volley of shots crashed and resounded down in the canyon, and Roark breathed relief. That would be Jordan coming in to take up his part of the war. For a moment it was quiet down below. The gunmen seemed to be thinking it over. They had to make up their minds which end of the canyon they were going to concentrate on, his end or Jordan's. Somewhere down there Jay Stark would be doing some fast thinking, but Roark couldn't see him. Then the waiting was over, and Roark knew the gunmen had made their battle plans.

Sharpshooter began his hop, skip and jump again from one shelter to another. Three more men were following after him, but they were concentrating on Roark's near side. The gunmen were getting ready to break out of the canyon on Roark's end, leaving one man to hold Jordan off until they got Roark boxed in and nailed down.

Roark blasted twice in Sharpshooter's direction, but the rifleman didn't have much to worry about. He was still out of short-gun range, and he intended to keep it that way. When he found the position he wanted he'd go in his hole and wait for his buddies to force Roark out into the open. Roark wondered if the fire fighters could hear the battle going on. He doubted that they could. He couldn't expect any help, not even from Jordan, because Jordan was fighting a stand-off down at the other end. All Roark could do was sit there and wait, and pretty soon the three men with short guns would have him forced around to where Sharpshooter could get a bullet into him.

It wasn't a pleasant prospect. Maybe he could take one or two down with him, but even that thought wasn't very satisfying when he knew that his ultimate end was going to be a shallow ditch in boothill.

The short guns opened up and began working away at his rock. Roark answered with his .44, and down in the canyon he could hear Matt Jordan having it out with the one-man holding force. He still couldn't see Jay Stark. Maybe Stark was the one exchanging shots with Jordan. Roark didn't have time to think about it. The short guns came on, slinking up behind rocks like battle-wise coyotes. They were working their way above him now, the bullets beginning to rain in, forcing him around on Sharpshooter's side of the rock. Then, suddenly, the shooting stopped down in the canyon.

It didn't make sense for a minute. Then Roark heard hoofbeats on packed clay, and a horse went fogging down the canyon through Jordan's end. Then Roark understood.

Jordan was dead—or shot up. That was the only way to explain the sudden quiet down there. The gunman, who was probably Jay Stark, was getting away. Roark cursed. But that wouldn't help him now, and it wouldn't help Jordan. Sharp-

When he went home for supper his broad face was wrapped in a gray concern, and he told his wife, Martha, the story in one soft-spoken sentence. Their meal would have been a dull and tasteless affair if it had not been for the innocent banter of Harry's son, Bill, eight years old this day and proud of it.

After supper Bill unwrapped his presents, and while these unpretentious gifts held the boy's attention Martha said, "Harry, it is nice to watch you laugh a little."

He affectionately circled her waist with one thick arm. "Lord knows," he said thoughtfully, "it is somethin' I have done little enough of lately."

They enjoyed the boy's pleasure with his gifts for half an hour before Harry shrugged his heavy shoulders and said, "I'd better be gettin' back to the stable." He added quickly, "You'll do just as well waitin' here tonight, son. I'm goin' to clean things up and hurry right home."

Bill nodded mutely, disappointment lengthening his young face, and Martha followed Harry to the door. "Can't you take him along?" she said. "He feels pretty grown up tonight."

"You keep him here," Harry said. "If Youngblood's hands bring that nester in tonight they'll lynch him. I wouldn't enjoy havin' him see that."

As he swung away up the street his mind was full, his thoughts unsettling. He neared the livery stable and breathed the not unpleasant odors of straw, manure, and horses; and he swore softly. In the neat buildings and the pattern of corrals which stretched back to the river there was more than just his livelihood. There were the pleasure he took from caring for horses, years of savings, and the proceeds from the sale of as snug and comfortable a small ranch as a man could ask for. There were all of of these things, hopelessly tied up in a business which was broke.

HE ENTERED the office and struck a match, and by its glow he saw the blond and pretty girl at his desk. He lifted the light higher, saw her finger fly to her lips, and put out the match without touching it to the lamp. Her breathing was clearly audible to him in the darkness, and the fear in those short breaths fell heavily into the murk between them.

His surprise at finding her here lost its edge and he said, "Aren't you Sally Dillon?"

"Yes. And my brother is the one Bar Y is after. I'd like to talk to you." Her voice was little more than a whisper, but firm, far beyond the crying stage.

"She came right out and admitted it," he thought, and he said aloud, "Foller me, and you can do that all right."

He extended his hand in the darkness and felt her fingers, cold and trembling, touch his. He led her from the office and far back between the rows of stalls in the barn.

"Did anybody foller you here?" he said.

"To town," she replied, fighting to keep her voice steady, "but not here. I came here through the alley. I hope they are getting muddy looking for me."

"I guess there is only one thing you could want from me," he said.

"Yes," she answered. "I must get a horse to him. He has the field mare, and he can never get away from them on her."

"They said he killed a man," Harry said softly.

Anger put strength in her voice. "You don't believe that."

"No, I guess I don't. If he had, killin' a Youngblood hand wouldn't send a man to hell in my book. What really happened?"

"The old story," she said. "You must know how they've tried to run us out. They were only trying again. Some of Youngblood's hands were running some stock down to the river. I've never seen stock run properly that fast. They broke down all of the fence Dad and Mort put up last week, and when Dad went out to put a stop to it one of them got off his horse and started to slap him.

"Mort got the rifle from the house and told them to take their hands off Dad. One of them yelled and shot at him. Mort killed him. He had to or get shot himself.

Before they rode away one of the others yelled, 'You'll hang for that, Dillon!' Mort wasn't going to leave with Dad hurt, but we took Dad down the river to Barton's—they're nesters, too—and Mort rode away. He'll try to get out of the country on the mare if I don't bring him a horse tonight."

"I thought it would be about like that," Harry said. "I reckon I thought so when I first heard about it this afternoon. I'll give you the fastest horse I've got."

When she assured him that she could get home from Mort's hiding place on the field mare, he saddled only one horse in the darkness. He helped her into the saddle outside and opened the gate in the river fence for her, turning back to the barn only after he heard her come out of the water on the other side.

His work-hardened hands completed the chores in the barn with no help from his mind, and after he had locked up he paused in the street and looked back at his property.

"I'm through when they find out," he thought aloud. "I'll sell out, and God, what a lickin' I'll take!"

Martha met him at the door and told him that she had put Bill to bed. "What kept you?" she asked. "Did they bring the Dillon boy in?"

"No," Harry said, "and I hope they never find him." He threw himself into a chair, his face dark and strained.

SHE sat on the arm of his chair and put her arm across his shoulders.

"Harry," she said, "whatever you've done, I don't care."

"Well, I've done it," he said, and told her about Sally Dilon's visit. "It means we're through," he finished. "And Lord knows I hate to lose out to one like Cort Youngblood."

"No, Harry," she said. "You're not losing to him. We came into this town at the wrong time, that's all. You've been fair with everybody."

"Fair and out of business," he said drily. "I can lay that to Youngblood. He's the one on this range who is crazy about runnin' out nesters. He works the most free range, and he is hurt most by them. The other spreads don't like 'em, either, but they haven't gone hog wild about it. I can still see that Johnson family movin' out, with the kids and the woman cryin' and Johnson wonderin' who he had hurt enough to make 'em want to burn his place.

"The other cattlemen didn't like that. Look at MacPherson and Rayburn. They hold as much range as Youngblood, and both of 'em hauled wood to nesters last winter during that long snow. But they are all cattlemen, and they act together. Losing Youngblood's business for rentin' to nesters wouldn't have broke me if the rest of 'em hadn't drifted away, too. They didn't make any hooraw about it like Youngblood, but I stopped gettin' their business, and all of the town merchants follered suit."

He sat quietly for a moment, with hopelessness a dark stain in his gray eyes. "I'll have to sell out, Marth. There are few people in town who ain't my creditors."

"Oh, Harry," she said, "it's not the end of the world! We'll get along. It will look better after you get some sleep."

He rose and kissed her lightly, proud of her courage. "It will have to look better," he said. "It couldn't look much worse."

In the morning he tried to share her cheerfulness during breakfast. He stood in the door with her and saw Bill off to school, and when at last he left her he hugged her until she gasped and laughed.

As he walked up the main street he tried to take some pleasure from the bright morning sun and the first sounds of activity from the blacksmith's shop, but the sight of two riders dismounting before the livery swept all pleasant things from his mind. Their horses carried Bar Y brands, and he recognized both men as Youngblood riders.

The tall man leaning against the jamb of the livery door was Abe Danton, Youngblood's foreman, the hardest of his crew. With him was lanky Dade Castle, a red-headed rail of a man who rode line on Youngblood's free range. Their loose-

limbed stance and arrangement about his door started a pulse pounding in Harry's head, and he thought with regret of his gun in the desk inside. He nodded to them as he put his key in the door, and for reply got only a soft punishment from their eyes.

The door opened under his hand and he stepped inside quickly. He heard them move behind him and knew that he could never reach the gun. His right shoulder dropped and he pivoted, swinging one clenched fist into the face of Abe Danton with enough power to drive the tall foreman to his knees. He swung again at Castle, but Danton's wild lunging against his knees shook him off balance and took the sting from his blow.

Danton now had him full in his grip, trying to throw him from his feet. Castle lunged against his chest and he went to the floor beneath them, his head ringing from a fist beneath his eye.

He rolled and tried to protect his head, and he felt the impact of Danton's fists against his arms and shoulders. Castle's boot caught him in the ribs, and he dropped his arms and gasped painfully for breath. He felt his arms grasped and held, and the pain and shock told him what their fists were doing to his face before he slipped into a warm, wet, and throbbing sleep. . . .

THE bucket of water from the stable which they dumped on him brought both consciousness and a renewed pulsing in his bleeding head. They hauled him to his feet, and Danton stood before him, swearing as he wiped at his own battered lips.

"Where did he go, nester lover?" Danton demanded.

Harry shook his head, and Danton lashed out at his unprotected stomach. The wind was torn from inside him and Danton's shape swam before his eyes. He shook his head again and said through *broken lips:*

"I don't know. I only gave her the horse."

Danton's fist drew back again. "Not enough yet?" he said.

Harry drew painful breath into his lungs. "Plenty, damn you!" he said. "I don't know where he is."

Danton dropped his fist and stepped back. "I don't believe he does. Put him away, Dade." Harry tried to lunge forward, but he could not escape the blow from behind.

Without the water he was unconscious longer, and when he opened his eyes he lay motionless for minutes before he could get to his feet. He groped his way to the stable door, and he fell once again before he reached the horse tank at the end of the barn and submerged his head in its depth.

He washed the blood from his face and eyes and sat with his back against the tank. Three times within an hour he plunged his head into the tank, and he forced himself to walk the length of the barn, cursing the weakness of his legs.

It was mid-morning before he felt sound enough to go to the office, and here in a windowpane he got his first look at his bruised and puffy face. Anger made him sick at his stomach, and he swore and whirled about warily as he heard someone at the door. In the doorway he saw Burt Kane, the town loafer who had told him about the killing at Dillon's yesterday.

"To hell with you, Burt," he said. "Get your eyes full."

Burt grinned lop-sidedly. "You look good now. I saw you out by the tank this mornin'. If it'll make you feel any better, the nester feller got clean away. Your horse is out of the state by now."

"Who's in town now?" Harry said.

"All the outfits. It's Saturday. Why? They're sure through with you, ain't they?"

The hard, coiling rage inside Harry drew his lips tight. "But I'm not through with them," he said. "But, I want you to find out where Youngblood and the two *who called on me are.*"

Burt's glance brightened with speculation. "That I already know," he said. "Youngblood's in the Gold Bar Saloon, Danton is over in the hotel taking a bath,

and Dade Castle is across the street in the restaurant. I wouldn't do anything foolish, Harry."

Harry took the gun from his desk and rammed it into the waist of his trousers. "Burt," he said with cold anger, "I might even do some killin'."

He stepped out into the street and crossed with unhurried gait to the restaurant.

Dade Castle's red head was easy to locate at the counter, and Harry walked straight toward him. Talk stopped in the place at his entrance, and this abrupt cessation of sound turned Castle's head. Harry lifted the gun in his hand and said:

"Don't even twitch, Dade."

Still in the motion of walking, he struck out with the gun, laying it against Castle's skull and shaking him loose from his stool.

"That's how it feels," he said.

He laid the gun on the counter and swung in the same motion. His fist broke through Castle's upflung arms and teeth collapsed beneath his knuckles. Castle fell backward and did not get up. Harry picked up the gun and left the restaurant.

He crossed the street and went into the rear of the building. Danton was humming inside and the door was locked. Harry dropped his shoulder and hit the flimsy panel with all his weight. The wood cracked and the lock gave way.

DANTON came to his feet in calf-deep water, and the shock of Harry's entrance held him motionless for a moment before his eyes came alive. His clothes and gun were on a chair, out of reach. Harry tossed his own weapon through the broken door, and he took the heavy bar of soap which Danton pitched at him high on his shoulder.

He hit Danton in the face, and the tall foreman's feet went out from under him in the water. His head struck the edge of the tub with a sick thud. Dazed and hurt, he tried to get up, and Harry said, "You can hardly move, but I couldn't move at all." He let Danton wobble to his feet, then knocked him to his knees again before he strode from the bathroom.

The clerk who had come from the front desk backed away, and Harry picked up his gun and walked out of the hotel. He thumped along the boardwalk to the Gold Bar Saloon, and he saw Andrew MacPherson and Sam Rayburn standing outside in the sun, listening to the excited words of a puncher who was waving wildly toward the restaurant.

MacPherson spoke softly through his bristling mustache, with no provocation in his words.

"Man, you are walkin' heavy, ain't you?"

Harry's baleful glance took in both the Scotsman and the other large-interest cattleman. "I have tip-toed for a year in this damn' town," he said, "and now I am stampin' my feet." He wheeled away through the saloon doors, and he saw Cort Youngblood bellied against the far end of the bar with two of his punchers.

Youngblood was tall and heavy, with a sun-browned skin near swarthiness. He swung his thick body from the hips when Harry's boots rapped on the floor, and foreboding took some of the color from about his lips. Harry held his gun on them and said:

"You two step away from the boss, far away."

There was a moment during which he did not think they would move, but in the face of his unmoving gun muzzle they lost their fight. Harry walked stiffly across the saloon, shoved Youngblood against the bar with his gun barrel, and tipped the rancher's Colt from its holster. He placed his own gun on the bar.

"How tough are you, Cort, alone?" he said.

Youngblood lunged away from the bar, and Harry took most of the power in the rancher's roundhouse swing on his shoulder. Still the shock of the blow made his head ring. He drew a gasping grunt from the rancher with a punch which tore along Youngblood's head, and the hard knuckles of his left hand found a soft bed in Youngblood's ribs.

He took two hands in his face before he

could find Youngblood with a blow which sent a pain along his own arm clear to the point of his shoulder. The rancher fell toward him, and he hit him again almost squarely on top of the head to drive him to the floor. Youngblood could not get up, and Harry stepped away, wiping his hand across his eyes, dimly aware that Youngblood's hands were rushing at him.

Their attack was arrested by MacPherson's heavy voice from the door.

"Hold on, Bar Y! That was as square as could be!" Harry wobbled toward the door, and MacPherson said, "Man, have ye wreaked enough to be happy now?"

Harry looked at him as levelly as he could through the swelling flesh about his eyes. "Yes," he said, "and I'll settle all the other debts as soon as I can arrange for an auction. The mud on a nester's boots is too good for this bellyless town."

He wheeled about and brushed through the swinging doors, swaying from one side of the boardwalk to the other as he walked back to the livery.

HE SWORE meaninglessly at Burt Kane as Burt tried to help him into his office, and he swayed across the room and dropped into the chair behind his desk. He jerked open drawers and stacked the top of his desk high with a disorderly pile of papers, each one of which represented a debt to someone in town. He was clumsily sorting this pile when a puncher from MacPherson's crew cautiously poked his head in the door.

"Mac's got a bum axle on the rig he drove in," the puncher said haltingly, "and he wondered if you'd rent him another to get home in. And Rayburn says with roundup comin' he'll need two good pullin' ponies for the chuckwagon. Can you handle 'em?"

Through the still ringing pain in his head Harry dimly caught the full meaning of these false stories, and he nodded shortly. He stopped sorting the papers in front of him as a boy from the feed store appeared in the doorway almost as soon as MacPherson's puncher had turned away.

This young clerk told him that Art Caslin at the fed store wondeerd if he would like to settle some of his feed bill by running some seed stuff out to a nester family on the river, and Burt Kane grinned and said, "I could drive for you, Harry."

Harry came to his feet, and Burt Kane said, "You ain't through yet. I've stood in this door and watched MacPherson and Rayburn walk into five stores that have been afraid to ask for your business so far."

The smile hurt Harry's lips, but enough hope came alive in him to take some of the shakiness from his legs.

"Burt," he said, "I sure hate to depend on a loafer like you, but I wish you'd sit here and take any more orders. I'm goin' to walk home to get cleaned up and tell Marth that maybe we won't be leavin' this crazy town after all."

Chloriders of the Desert

SILVER PROSPECTORS in the semi-arid desert sections of the West were at one time known as "chloriders." The name had an interesting origin. In the dry country between the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada surface waters contain a great deal of salt. Over the ages this reacted with the silver deposits that outcropped in the region to form a bonanza rich silver ore known as horn silver.

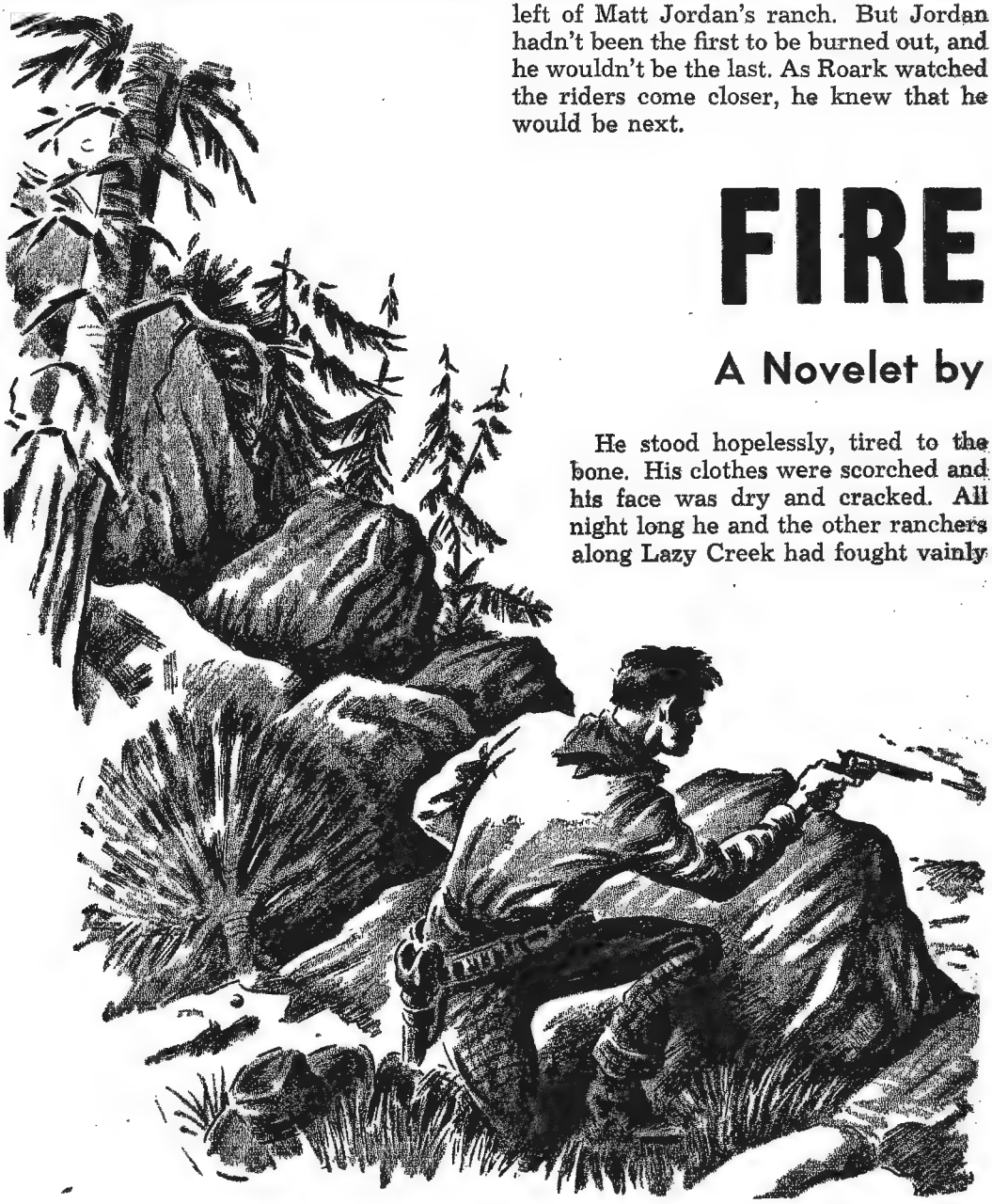
The ore has a yellowish, waxy appearance and contains 75% actual metallic silver. It is so soft it can be pared with a knife, like horn. A thin sliver of it will melt in a candle flame. These were easy tests for a prospector to make, and accordingly it was a fortune in born silver, a *chloride* ore, that the "chloriders" prospected for in the desert mountain ranges—often with fantastic success.

—John A. Thompson

FIRE

A Novelet by

He stood hopelessly, tired to the bone. His clothes were scorched and his face was dry and cracked. All night long he and the other ranchers along Lazy Creek had fought vainly



CHAPTER I

Burned Out

OVER a ridge to the east, three horsemen appeared, riding out of an angry, early morning sun. Roark Lowry had been waiting for them, standing on the naked sun-baked stretch of ground in front of his shanty, the place he hoped would some day be his front yard.

To the south, across the wild mesquite and thorned brush of this southwestern Texas country, gray smoke was looping lazily against a bright morning sky. Smoke and ashes, that was all that was left of Matt Jordan's ranch. But Jordan hadn't been the first to be burned out, and he wouldn't be the last. As Roark watched the riders come closer, he knew that he would be next.

FIGHT

CLAY RANDALL

Roark Lowey saw all his work in ashes—and vowed to track down the man who'd brought range ruin

to save Jordan's land. But, urged by the wind, the fire had raced across the range, faster than a man could run. Now Jordan's house and barns and corrals lay in ashes, his grazing land was ruined and his livestock hopelessly scattered.

Roark glanced back at his own meager spread, at his two-room shanty, and the single barn, and the scattered corrals. Then he looked dumbly at the oncoming riders, too tired to feel anything, even anger.

The man riding in front was Jay Stark, gaunt-faced, cold-eyed, prototype of the gunmen and wanted men who had flocked to Texas after the War Between the States. Stark had set himself up as a business man, as the head of the Southwest Ranching Company, but few people were fooled by that. A man like Stark never had but one business. His only working tool was the .44 tied down low on his thigh. The gunman pulled his horse up in front of Roark, the two side men hanging back at a respectful distance, watching.

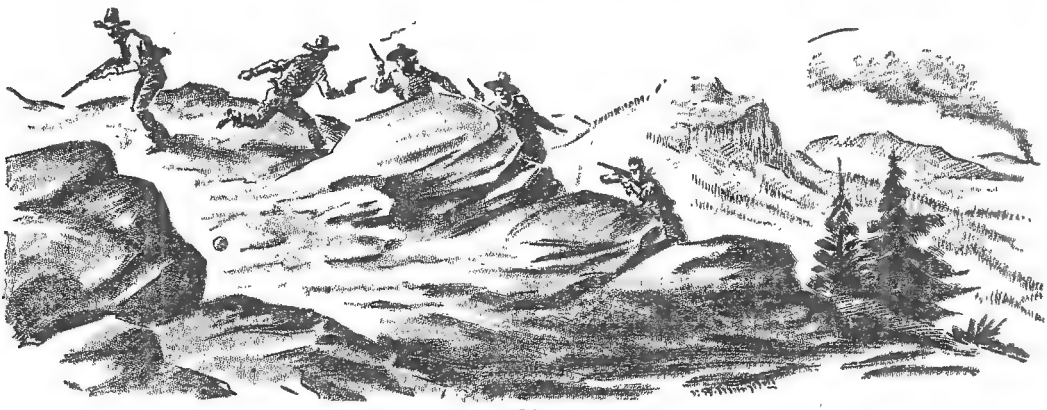
Jay Stark grinned thinly as he glanced to the south at the rising smoke. "I hear Jordan had some bad luck," he said. "Maybe he made a mistake by not selling to my company while he still had something to sell." He slouched comfortably in the saddle, smiling, seeming to consider something briefly in his mind. "Which reminds me, Roark," he said. "My company is interested in buying this spread of yours. Drop around to the office tomorrow and we'll talk about it."

Roark said tightly, anger beginning to rise out of weariness, "There's nothing to talk about, Stark. I'm not selling."

Stark considered Jordan's smoking ranch in the distance. "Maybe you'll change your mind," he said mildly.

Roark stood rigid as the gunman pulled his horse around. The two side men wheeled and fell in on either side of him and, smoothly as machines, the three rode back into the east toward the town of Lazy Creek.

AN HOUR later Roark lay on his bunk inside the small stockade shanty, but sleep wouldn't come. He told himself desperately that there must be a way to beat men like Jay Stark. Other ranchers before him had told themselves the same



thing, but in the end they had either sold at Stark's own outrageous price, or they had been burned out.

It had all started with the end of the war and with the opening of the great cattle trails to the north. Roark, like most of the other ranchers, had been a soldier of the Confederacy, and after the war he had come to this wild brush country. Brushpoppers, such men were called. They went in and got their ropes around the murderous, bawling range cattle and burned them with their brands. They built their herds the hard way, a head at a time.

There was no law in places like Lazy Creek. Not even the carpetbaggers or Davis Police ventured into this Godforgotten part of Texas. They didn't even bother with men like Jay Stark, until the trails suddenly opened to Kansas railheads and gave the ranchers a market for their cattle.

Then this worthless country suddenly became valuable grazing land. It was cattle-country, money country, and sooner or later outfits like the Southwest Ranching Company appeared where there was money to be had.

They had come from nowhere, Jay Stark and his gang, setting up their office in Lazy Creek. No one took them seriously, at first, or the ridiculous prices they offered the ranchers for their holdings. But after some of the smaller ranchers, who had refused to sell, had been burned out, they began to realize what they were up against. Some of them decided it was better to be an ex-rancher than a dead one. Bitterly, some of the ranchers began to sell at Stark's price. The ones who didn't— Well, there were places like Jordan's, still smoking, to remind them of what they could expect.

Somewhere in the midst of these thoughts Roark went to sleep.

The sun had slipped across the sky and was hanging low in the west when the sound of hoofs disturbed him. He got up groggily from the bunk, sloshed water on his face at the washstand, and went to the door to see who the visitor was.

There were two of them, riding wildly, shouting something that Roark couldn't understand. As they got closer Roark saw that one of the riders was Matt Jordan. Behind him Roark finally recognized another rancher, John Hassalt, who was motioning frantically to someone down at the bottom of the slope.

For one sickening instant Roark stood frozen in the doorway of his shack, watching a team of horses appear over the rise dragging gang plows onto his property. That could mean only one thing. He buckled on his gunbelt quickly and rushed outside, the first hot, dry smell of smoke clearing his brain. As he ran for the barn he saw the fire racing across the brushland—his land.

As Roark flung the barn doors open to free the livestock, Matt Jordan pulled his horse up beside him. "We didn't see the smoke until just a while ago," Jordan shouted. "My men are taking the gang plows down to the south. Maybe they can make a firebreak before it reaches the buildings."

"Thanks," Roark called hurriedly. He got a saddle on one of his horse and swung up. The two men pulled their horses to the south and raced toward the point of the blaze. Other ranchers had seen the smoke by now and were coming up from the direction of town, weary, tired-faced men who had already fought one fire in the past twelve hours.

Roark swung down from his horse when they reached the blaze. Men were falling in on the line of fire, beating at it with sacking, branches, anything they could get their hands on. Step by step, the fighters were forced back. They tied handkerchiefs over their faces, but that didn't keep the heat from searing them. Roark was forced to draw back to get some of the smoke out of his lungs. John Hassalt, his closest friend in Lazy Creek, fell back with him.

"Did you see how it started?" Roark asked hoarsely.

Wearily, Hassalt wiped his blackened face on the sleeve of his shirt. "Couldn't tell for sure," he answered. "I was over

at the Jordan place when we first saw the smoke. Maybe the wind carried some sparks over from the Jordan fire."

Maybe. But Roark didn't think so. Everything was too pat, too well timed. Jay Stark would have known the ranchers would be too exhausted to fight a second brush fire in one day. It was too much of a coincidence, that a few stray sparks would start a fire in the exact place where the wind would sweep it over the whole range.

BUT Jay Stark would have to wait. Roark pulled his handkerchief over his face and moved toward the fire again. Behind him, men were setting up the gang plows, but already Roark could see that they were too late. The wind was sweeping the fire on, and there weren't enough men to hold it in check until a firebreak could be completed.

The ranchers fought furiously, but hopelessly. In the end they had to move the teams and plows back and start in a different place.

It happened so fast that it was almost impossible for Roark to believe it had happened at all. But it had happened all right—the charred, smoking proof was behind him. At last the blaze was stopped by the natural firebreak of Lazy Creek, but not before Roark had lost everything that he had sweated for two years to get. Everything was gone; the land lay in black, smoldering ruins. The tired men had been forced back to the other side of the creek. They stood there helpless, grim-faced and weary, watching the ever-hungry fire eat away at the shanty, then the barn, and last, the corrals.

Roark watched numbly. The other men began to get their things together and move away quietly. Most of them didn't try to say anything to him, for they knew that talking wouldn't do any good at a time like this.

But Matt Jordan stopped beside Roark for a moment.

"We'll see if we can round up some of our cattle tomorrow," he said, wiping his big face with a blackened handkerchief, "after the men have had a chance to get some rest."

Roark nodded. He had never liked Jordan, for personal reasons, but now somehow he felt close to the man. Because Jordan had also lost his spread, it gave them the common bond of tragedy.

Roark said, "Sure," but he knew that he would never see those wild range cattle of his again. Anyway, even if he found them, he had no grazing land for them now.

At last Jordan was gone and all the others, except old John Hassalt who stood there beside Roark, not saying anything for a while.

Bitterly, Roark looked at the blackened land that he had made such big plans for. Some day, where the shack had been, he was going to have a real home. Both men were thinking the same thing. Some day Roark had hoped to bring Vivian Hassalt here, old John's daughter, and make it her home. It had been a dream, a reason for working when work seemed useless in this war-broken South. Now, even the dream was gone.

The sun died suddenly in the west. A grayness settled over the land as red and yellow tongues of flame devoured the last remaining timbers of Roark's shack. Off to the south, where Jordan's spread was, there was only darkness. Any bitterness that Roark might have had for the man was gone now. Jordan had made plans too, about himself and Vivian Hassalt. Both their plans had been ruined the same day, in the same way.

John Hassalt said, "Why don't you let us put you up at our place for a while? It won't do any good for you to go on standing here."

But Roark didn't think that he could face Vivian now. And he knew that before long blind fury would rise out of his hopelessness, and he wanted to be alone when that happened. On his hip, Roark felt the weight of his gun, the only thing he had salvaged from the fire. He thought blackly that before long he would want to see Jay Stark—but not on the business Stark had mentioned.

CHAPTER II

Lawman of Lazy Creek

IT WAS late when Roark rode into Lazy Creek alone. Most of the town was asleep. A couple of saloons were still open, and a lamp burned feebly in the lobby of the Star Hotel. Roark unsaddled his horse and turned the animal into a livery corral. Anger had been growing in him during his long ride from his burned-out ranch, until it had set a vein in his head to pounding. He walked stiffly up the plank walk to the first saloon. The place was empty except for the bartender.

The next saloon had a low stake poker game in the back, but there was no sign of Jay Stark or any of his men. The bartender brought some bourbon and a glass and poured.

"Tough luck," he said, his face serious.

"Has Stark been around?" Roark asked.

"He was here earlier. That was about two hours ago."

Roark said, "Thanks." He downed the bourbon and put two bits on the bar. The bartender fingered an empty glass nervously. He was a big, bland-faced man who had been in Lazy Creek ever since there had been a town. Little happened in the town that escaped his notice.

The bartender said, "Why don't you get some sleep, Roark? Maybe in the morning things will look different."

Roark said nothing. His mind was made up.

"Stark's a fast man with a gun," the bartender urged. "I've seen him work."

Roark said, "Thanks," again, but his mind hadn't changed. He turned and went out of the saloon.

In the end he had to take the bartender's advice, for Jay Stark was not to be found. Not that night. Roark stopped in front of the Star Hotel, fingering the loose silver in his pocket. He didn't know how long that silver would have to last him. He went down to the wagon yard at the end of the street and made his bed in the hayloft, along with a couple of punchers who were sleeping off a celebration. He lay down, stiffly at first, and then relaxed. Jay Stark would keep through the night. There would be another day.

THE NEXT morning a hand shook Roark awake. He sat up suddenly, with his gun in his hand, and realized that he must have gone to sleep holding it. Then he recognized the figure of John Hassalt before him.

"Don't you ever sleep?" Roark said.

Hassalt shrugged the question off. He was a gray man in his early fifties, but he had grown tough with the years, like the country in which he lived.

"Some of the ranchers are talking about lynching Jay Stark," he said. "We're going to need your help to stop it."

The first thing that occurred to Roark was, "Why stop it? He's got it coming," and he said it aloud.

Hassalt shook his head. "If there's ever to be law in Lazy Creek, we can't start it that way. Anyway, you know Stark isn't the man we really want. The brains behind the Southwest Ranching Company is higher up somewhere."

Roark had forgotten that. Hassalt was right. They had known all along that Stark wasn't the kind of man to run an organization like that. Roark felt his anger coming on again, but it was controlled anger this time, not the blind, hunting anger that he had known last night. If a lynching took place now, Roark could see that it would throw the law, what there was of it, on the Ranching Company's side. He stood up and holstered his .44.

"Last night I was looking for Stark myself," he said. "But—well, that was last night. I'm still not sure that he shouldn't be lynched, but I'm willing to listen to your side of it."

Hassalt let out a breath of relief. He said, "First off, there's got to be a law in Lazy Creek." Roark started to protest that the town already had a sheriff, but he

knew that the fat, lazy hulk who wore a star and slept in the sheriff's office couldn't be called a law. Hassalt went on, "Some of the ranchers have been talking it over. They figure the best man for the job would be one of us, somebody that knows what it's like to be burned out of business." He hesitated for just a moment. "We think you're the man for the job, Roark."

Roark stared at the older man. He didn't want to be a lawman. He wasn't a gunman. He was just an ordinary man full of anger. A rancher without a ranch.

He said finally, "It's good to know I've got friends, but I don't want the job. I'd rather settle with Stark my own way."

"Would anything really get settled?" Hassalt asked. Then he added, "Anyway, promise me one thing—that you won't go off half-cocked until this afternoon."

Directly after noon the ranchers began to come into town, stern-faced men with purpose in their faded eyes. They gathered at the end of the street at the squat sod building that served as the sheriff's office. Roark and Hassalt waited on the fringe of the crowd, and after a while a fat, heavy-eyed man appeared in the doorway and peered out with vague bewilderment.

"Now's as good a time as any," somebody said. "We might as well tell him."

The sheriff stood batting his eyes, until it finally dawned on him that they were talking about him. "Here," he said peevishly, "what's goin' on out there?"

"Maybe if you'd come out of that office once in a while," someone said, "you'd find out what's goin' on."

The sheriff looked hurt, not knowing what to say. He was a good man, but he wasn't cut out to be a lawman. Then John Hassalt moved up to the front of the ranchers and spoke gently. "The truth is, Abe, we're thinking of putting in a new sheriff. A younger man, maybe. Somebody that can handle the trouble we've got here in Lazy Creek."

The sheriff got a look of bulldog stubbornness on his face. "You can't do that," he wheezed. "I was elected to this office."

"We voted you in," a rancher spoke up angrily. "I reckon we can vote you out."

The speaker got plenty of support behind him. The stubborn look began to go out of the sheriff's eyes. He rubbed his silver star nervously.

"We've made up our minds, Abe," Hassalt said softly. "It's for the good of the whole country. We wouldn't take steps like this if it wasn't."

The sheriff knew he was beaten. The hurt look went away and one of dull anger took its place in his eyes. He glared out at the waiting ranchers, and then at John Hassalt. "All right, John," he said, "if that's the way you want it." He unpinned his badge and hurled it at Hassalt's feet. "But you'll be sorry you did this thing."

SOME of the ranchers laughed as the fat figure waddled away. But John Hassalt's face was sober as he picked the badge out of the dust and turned to face them.

"Well, we got the star off one man," he said. "We're out of a sheriff now. Is there anyone among you that thinks he wants to wear it?"

The men shuffled uneasily. They weren't anxious to take on the responsibility of breaking up a gang like Jay Stark's.

"Roark," somebody said.

The man seemed to have spoken for all of them. Roark stood rigid and self-conscious as they turned to look at him. Smiling faintly, John Hassalt came back to his side, and said:

"It looks like it's up to you now, Roark." He held the star out. "Will you take it?"

Afterward Roark didn't remember just how it happened. One moment he was a burned-out rancher, the next he was a sheriff, and men were crowding around and slapping him on the back. He didn't have personal problems any more. Everybody's problem was his problem now, and he wasn't sure that he liked it that way. But it was too late to change now.

As if to flaunt it in his face, Jay Stark came riding down the street, flanked by his two side men, grinning—and Roark couldn't do a thing. He had to do things the way of the law now. He had to have proof before he could go after a man.

Matt Jordan elbowed out of the crowd to shake hands with Roark. "I wish this had happened a while back," the big man said. "If it had, maybe I'd still have my ranch." He grinned as he said it, and Roark thought suddenly that it took a lot of guts for a man to grin like that so soon after he had been burned out.

Jordan said, "It looks like we're in the same fix, both of us being ranchers without ranches." He hesitated, still grinning, but Roark could see that his eyes were serious. "If you need a deputy on this new job of yours—" he patted his .44, "well, I'm in the market for a job."

For the first time, Roark decided that he liked this big man who could grin at a time like this. He thought quickly, but only for a moment. He said, "The pay won't be much— But if you want the job, we'll swear you in."

It was strange the way hardship could bring men like them together. Matt Jordan hadn't been in Lazy Creek long. He had come down from the Arkansas country, he said, and with some savings had bought the spread to the south of Roark's. He was a strange man, in both speech and dress, and the other ranchers hadn't taken to him much at first.

Roark especially hadn't liked him. People in Lazy Creek had reckoned from the first that there would be trouble between them, because when two men like that go after the same girl, sooner or later something has to give. Nor had Vivian Hassalt made things any easier. At first she had been fascinated by Jordan's strangeness, his gentleman's way of doing things. Perhaps it was Roark's fault after that. Perhaps he had taken it for granted that Vivian Hassalt was his girl, and always would be—and Vivian Hassalt wasn't the kind of girl to be taken for granted.

That night, as Roark lay in his new bunk in the back of the sheriff's office, he wondered about that. That part hadn't changed between him and Jordan. They were still enemies, and would be until Vivian Hassalt made her choice. But it was somehow different now. They were enemies on even ground. They both knew what it was to be burned out, and that made a difference.

NEXT morning Roark got up, still not quite believing that he was sheriff of Lazy Creek now, that he wasn't a rancher any more. Bitterness swept over him as he thought of the ranch and Vivian Hassalt, and of all the plans he had once made.

He saw Vivian a little later when she and her father brought the Hassalt buckboard into town. They stopped down in the middle of the block by the feed store. The old man went in, and Vivian came down to the sheriff's office.

She was a tall girl. She would seem almost too tall beside most men, but not beside Roark. Nor, Roark thought, beside Matt Jordan. She had clear brown eyes and her hair was dark and long, but not long enough to be a bother, as most women's seemed to be.

Roard met her with a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I guess you never expected to see me standing behind a sheriff's badge," he said.

She smiled slightly, almost sadly. "Roark, I'm sorry about the ranch. I wish there was a way I could help."

He said, "I'll build it back some day when all this is over." He wanted to ask her to wait until that day came, but somehow words were suddenly hard to come by. He could only repeat grimly. "I'll build it back."

Maybe he would have found the courage to ask her then, but Matt Jordan just then appeared in the doorway. Vivian turned to him and smiled. Roark felt jealousy pull inside him, but he wouldn't admit it, even to himself.

Jordan was still able to grin. He asked, "What do you think about two ex-ranchers going into the law business?"

shooter and his pals were quiet for a minute. They were trying to decide what would be the best thing to do—whether they ought to make a run for it, or go ahead and finish the job they had started.

Roark waited and sweat began to pop out all over his body. It would be easy for the gunmen to back up and get away through Jordan's end. Jordan was dead now. Evidently they had decided to clean

EASY GO—EASY COME

THE cost of living was certainly sky-high in California in 1848, when the gold rush was on. The Parker House in San Francisco rented for fifteen thousand dollars—for thirty days. A single egg cost a dollar. A barrel of flour cost fifty. If a miner needed a butcher knife, he had to pay as much as thirty dollars for it.

There's a case on record where a man wanted some Seidlitz powders so badly that he was eager to exchange an ounce and a half of pure gold for the medicine, the cash value of the gold at the time being $12.00 per ounce. But it may not have seemed very expensive to the purchaser since, according to prevailing records, any lucky fellow could mine from fifty to five hundred dollars' worth of gold dust in a day.

Other equally fantastic facts of the period concern the soldier who spent his twenty-day furlough in a California mine, and went back to camp fifteen hundred dollars richer—and the two men who dug seventeen thousand dollars' worth of gold in a week from a rock that was only four feet wide.

—Mark Knight

everything up at once, finish the job now, for another short-gun volley came in on the rock. Roark shot back, but they were getting on top of him, forcing him back. He could almost feel Sharpshooter down there waiting. He could almost see a cold eye sighting over a rifle barrel, a calm finger beginning to squeeze on a trigger. Then the men with the .44s made a rush, firing as they came.

INSTINCTIVELY, Roark jumped back, and only when it was too late did he realize that he had been forced into the open, into Sharpshooter's line of fire. He emptied his .44 at the running gunmen and saw one of them go down. He wheeled, and down in the canyon he saw Sharpshooter come up from behind a rock, cold and confident, the sun reflecting brightly from the shiny black barrel of his rifle. It all happened in an instant. Roark froze. His legs wouldn't move. He could only stand there and wait for the bullet to slam into him.

But the bullet didn't come. Sharpshooter jerked up suddenly. The rifle dropped from his hands, and he fell across the rock and lay still. It was then that Roark heard the single report of a .44 and saw Matt Jordan running in front of the dead rifleman, making for a rock on Roark's right to cut off the other gunmen.

The gunmen had seen what had happened. They fell flat and fired a few more times at Roark's fortress, but they didn't have much heart for it now. The box they were building had suddenly fallen to pieces. Matt Jordan had come back from the dead to kill off their Sharpshooter, and what had looked like a sure thing before was an even fight now. The gunmen didn't like the odds. They began to squirm back out of the crossfire that Roark and his deputy laid down. When they got back far enough they scrambled to their feet and made a run for it.

They made it down to the bend in the canyon before Roark could get his gun reloaded. Jordan stood panting, his face pale. Then they heard the echo of horses running and they knew that their men had got away, but that wasn't too important. Neither of them was Jay Stark.

It took a while for Roark to get the importance of what had happened. He would be dead now if it hadn't been for Matt Jordan. He looked over at his deputy and tried to think of something to say.

Jordan grinned tightly and put his gun away. "I don't know if I did right," he said. "I let one man get away. But I saw

them getting you boxed in. I figured if you didn't get some help, you'd be a goner."

"You did right," Roark said soberly. "I'd be a star candidate for boothill if you hadn't got rid of that rifleman. When I heard your shooting stop, I thought they'd got you."

Matt Jordan wiped his face. "That's what the gunman thought," he said. "It was my only chance to be of any help. I played dead, and when my man got away I was able to take care of the boy with the rifle." His hand was shaking slightly as he brought out tobacco and began rolling a cigarette. He nodded at the dead man up ahead, the one Roark had stopped. "Was he one of Stark's gang?" he asked.

Roark got his gun reloaded and shoved it back in its holster. "I don't know," he said. "Let's take a look."

The man was about forty years old, with a stubble of beard on his face and a bullet hole about two inches to the left of his shirt pocket. He looked as if he had been dead for a long time. Roark went through his pockets but found nothing. He had never seen the man before. He stood up and nodded down to the floor of the canyon.

"Let's go down and have a look at the other one. Maybe he'll tell us something."

SHARPSHOOTER was a little younger than the other gunman, but he was just as dead. His pale eyes stared blankly into the sun. His long carbine lay on the ground at his feet. He had been a good shot all right, but he hadn't had time to get off the one that really would have counted. Roark turned him over and recognized him as one of the men who had been with Stark that first day, the day his ranch had burned.

"He was one of Stark's side men," Roark said flatly. "I've seen him before. Did you get a look at the man you were dueling with?"

Jordan shook his head. "Like I said, I was playing dead. It could have been Stark, but I didn't see him."

Up toward Pop Simmons' place smoke was still boiling up. Roark stared at it with anger and helplessness. He wanted to go after Jay Stark, but instinctively he knew that wouldn't get to the bottom of things. Only after he got the head of the ranching company would it do any good to go after Stark. He looked down at the dead Sharpshooter. Slowly an idea began to form in Roark's mind.

He jerked his head at his deputy without looking up. "See if you can find our horses," he said. "We're taking this one back with us."

Jordan looked at him. "Why bother?" he asked. "Somebody can pick them up later. A dead man won't help us."

Roark said, "Nobody but us knows he's dead. It's just an idea, but it might make the head of the ranching company show his hand." The idea was growing now. "We'll take him back to town while nobody's there. We'll say he's dying and we expect him to tell us everything we need to know. If the boss of the ranching company is as smart as I think he is, he'll want to stop his man from talking."

Jordan began to get the idea. He smiled tightly. "And we'll be waiting for him," he said slowly. "It might work. It's worth a try."

Roark waited while his deputy went after the horses. He stared at the dead face and wondered if Sharpshooter would be able to tell him something after all. He stared at the glistening black barrel of the carbine and felt a chill go through him. If it hadn't been for Jordan, Roark would be the dead one.

CHAPTER IV

Roark Sets a Trap

WHEN Roark and Jordan reached town with the body, the town was almost empty. Most of the men were out to Pop Simmons' place now, and Roark was just as glad. They took the body into the single cell at the back of the sheriff's office and stretched it out on the

cot. Roark spoke over his shoulder to his deputy.

"We might as well make it look good. Go down the street and tell Doc Bascom he's got a patient. You can spread the word around that we expect Sharpshooter to talk as soon as he regains consciousness."

The doctor, a long-faced man carrying a black bag, came a few minutes later. He glanced at Sharpshooter's dead face, raised one of the dead man's eyelids and stood up.

"I'm not Godamighty," Bascom said sternly. "I can't bring people back from the dead."

"I know," Roark said, "but this time I want you to look like you're trying."

Then he told the doctor his plan, explained how he hoped that the ranching boss would try to get Sharpshooter before he started talking. If it happened that way, they would know whom they were fighting against.

The doctor was doubtful, but he agreed to play his part. He sat in the cell, staring at the dead man. At last the weary, smoke-blackened fire fighters began trailing into town. Pop Simmons' ranch was gone. The whole story of the futile fight was in their eyes. Slowly, without reason or purpose at first, the men began gathering outside the sheriff's office. Roark waited impatiently, feeling his insides begin to tighten. He would soon know if his plan was going to work. If the boss was out there among them, he would be thinking up a way to stop Sharpshooter from talking.

After a while Matt Jordan came back, smiling grimly. He said, "Well, I've passed the word around. I guess all we have to do now is wait."

Roark nodded but he was looking out at the crowd. The anger out there was almost a tangible thing that lay heavy and brooding over the heads of the men. Fear was there, too. Fear that their ranches would go the way Pop Simmons' had.

After a moment a figure came up and stood in the doorway. His face was black with soot, but his pale eyes were startlingly clear and full of anger. For an instant Roark hardly recognized the man as John Hassalt. He had never seen such anger in those eyes before.

"I hear you've got one of the firebugs in there," Hassalt said hoarsely.

Roark hesitated, then he nodded. "That's right," he said.

"Do you think he'll talk? Do you think he'll be telling who his boss is?"

ROARK said carefully, "He'll talk—if we bring him back to consciousness."

Hassalt walked over toward the open door of the cell. He stood there for a moment, looking at the doctor's back, clenching and unclenching his fists. He said flatly, "Pop Simmons has been in this country for a long time. He worked hard for what he got. Now it's gone. Like all our ranches will be gone." Without warning he walked through the cell door.

The doctor stood up quickly. Hassalt flung him to one side before Roark or Jordan could move. He grabbed the front of Sharpshooter's shirt, jerked the body up from the cot. "I know a way to make him talk!" he grated. He knotted a heavy fist, but Roark and Matt Jordan were suddenly across the room, grabbing his arms. Angrily, Hassalt fought back to keep his hold on Sharpshooter's shirt, but Roark and Jordan made him let go, and the body sagged heavily back on the cot. Only then did Hassalt see that the man was dead.

Suddenly all the fight was gone out of him. He stared, wiped his eyes with the scorched sleeve of his shirt, stared some more. At last he turned away.

"I'm all right now," he said flatly. "I don't know what got into me. I was all wound up, I didn't get much sleep. I guess I must have gone kind of crazy for a minute."

Roark and Jordan looked at each other quickly, and then looked away. John Hassalt walked heavily out of the office, and before long the crowd began to break up. Roark's fine idea was no good now. Whoever the boss of the ranching com-

pany was, he could rest comfortably again. . . .

The sun was beginning to go down, and outside the office long shadows were stretching lazily in the street. Matt Jordan sat quietly by the office window, smoking. Roark sat at the small sheriff's desk, thinking, and not wanting to think, and knowing that his deputy was in the same state. Roark kept telling himself that the plan had never been any good from the first, that it had just been a shot in the dark. But in the back of his mind he couldn't get away from the fact that John Hassalt had played it exactly the way he had expected the ranching boss to play it.

That was crazy. He kept telling himself that, too. He had known John Hassalt and his daughter as long as he had known anybody in Lazy Creek. Hassalt wasn't the kind to head an organization like that.

But the fact was still there. There were other things too, that kept gnawing at the back of his brain. Hassalt's ranch was situated to the north, just above Roark's and Jordan's spreads. Could it be more than a coincidence that Hassalt's place had been spared while theirs were burned out?

Roark shook that out of his mind. But there was something else. He remembered the morning after his ranch had burned, the morning that Hassalt had asked his help in keeping the ranchers from lynching Jay Stark. It occurred to Roark that the ranching boss would do everything he could to save his top gunman. It also occurred to Roark that the boss would want to know what plans the sheriff might have. The ideal way to find out would be to put his closest friend in office.

Outside the last pale daylight was gone and it had suddenly become night. This was the quiet time of day when families were just finishing their suppers and women were getting the children in bed. Across the street, lamps were being lit in a saloon, and from the distance came a muffled sound of hoofs. At last Matt Jordan moved from his place by the window and asked the question that Roark had been asking himself.

"What are we going to do now?"

Roark didn't know. He got up woodenly and saw to the hang of his gun. He was thinking about Vivian Hassalt, and he knew that his deputy was thinking about her too.

"We can go after Jay Stark," he said at last. "He was the one that actually set the fire today."

Jordan said, "But can you prove it?"

"We saw his men."

"But can you prove that they were his men?"

Roark knew that he couldn't prove anything. Not yet.

The next morning he rode back to the battle ground, back to the canyon behind Pop Simmons' burned-out ranch. He wasn't looking for anything in particular, but somehow he had the feeling that the answer was there, if he could only find it. He spent the best part of the morning down there, thinking, looking, before he finally came across something.

HE MADE his find near the canyon floor where Jordan and the gunman had done their fighting—two pieces of stained, tissue-thin paper. He picked them up thoughtfully, wondering. He had a feeling that those papers could tell him everything he wanted to know, if he could only get it through his head what they were trying to say to him. Above him he heard a horse shy nervously.

A voice said: "Roark."

He looked up and saw Vivian Hassalt sitting on a bay gelding on the lip of the canyon. His deputy, Matt Jordan, was beside her; both were watching him. Roark got his horse and rode up to them.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

Vivian didn't look at him. Matt Jordan jerked his head to the north, toward the stage trail that went north from El Paso. In two or three places on the trail Roark saw feathery puffs of dust that hovered over wagons. The wagons were heading away from Lazy Creek.

Roark looked a question, and Matt Jordan said, "They're leaving the country.

There's Pat Duncan and his family in the first wagon. Joe Maisfield and Walt Sanders in the others. I reckon there'll be others after a while."

Roark didn't get it at first. He said, "Where are they going?"

Vivian answered, still not looking at him. "They're leaving Lazy Creek," she said. "They sold their holdings to Jay Stark's company. It was either that or get burned out like the others."

They were all small ranchers like Roark had been. They had been expecting protection, but Roark hadn't given it to them, so they were giving up the land they had settled. Vivian didn't say it with words, but Roark understood that was what she meant. His first feeling was of helpless anger, but that quickly gave way to relief. At least Vivian didn't know about the trap he had set, the one her father had stepped into.

There was a feeling of uneasiness between them. Matt Jordan tried to break it by saying, "I was at the office when Vivian came with the news that the ranchers were leaving. I thought you'd want to know." He nodded down at the canyon. "Did you find anything down there?"

Roark still had the bits of paper in his hand. He showed them to Jordan, hoping that they would mean something to him.

"What do they mean?" Jordan asked.

Roark said, "I won't know—yet."

That night as Roark sat in his office, he was no longer sure of what was right and what was wrong. He knew only that he was filled with a helpless anger, and he wondered if the ranchers had been right that day when they had wanted to hang Jay Stark. Maybe Stark was the answer, after all. Roark wanted to believe that now. He wanted to believe that Stark himself was the boss of the ranching company. More than anything else, he wanted to forget the way John Hassalt had walked into the trap he had set. While he was thinking about that, a shot shattered the night.

Roark went quickly to the door and looked out. There was activity down at the other end of the street, but he couldn't see what it was. Probably some cowboy had come into town to spend his wages in the noisiest way he could think of, but a moment later that answer was spoiled. A pale-faced man whom Roark recognized as a saloonkeeper came running out of the darkness.

"It's Jay Stark!" the man panted heavily as he got to the office. "He shot a man in a poker game at my place!"

All Roark's fine ideas fell to pieces. A saloon shooting was the work of a hotheaded gunman, not of a cool business head behind a scheming ranching company. Anyway, Roark was thinking, at last we've got something on Stark. Enough to arrest him. Maybe enough to force him to tell who his boss is. But he'd have to take the gunman alive.

EVEN as he was thinking, Roark was running along the hitching rack to his horse. Out of the darkness another figure pounded up. It was Matt Jordan. They both swung up to their horses at the same time, and rode in a hard short spurt down to where the activity was.

"It was Stark," Jordan shouted as they rode. "I was down by the livery stable when it happened. I think he headed south. Down to the canyons probably."

Roark nodded grimly in the darkness, but said nothing. They stopped long enough at the saloon to learn that Jordan's guess had been right. Roark directed a posse down to the south pass in case Stark tried to get out that way. But he and Jordan made for the north, toward the broken hill country that the gunman would most probably make for.

Pale moonlight lay over the land, giving the landscape a ghostly look. Roark was thinking grimly of a lot of things. Of his ranch that had burned. Of a hotheaded gunman who had finally overplayed his hand. Growing anger made Roark tense in the saddle. He glanced once at Jordan and saw that he was also tense, his face set.

The two men pulled their horses up on the sloping banks of Lazy Creek. The shallow stream was disturbed and mud-

died. It had been crossed only a short time before, and Roark and Jordan knew they were on the right track.

At the north end of the canyon they pulled up again. From here, Stark would have either headed south for the border or turned north toward Roark's own burned-out spread. And—both men were thinking—toward the Hassalt spread.

It was too dark for reading sign. It would be guesswork from now on. Roark hesitated only for an instant. He nodded to his deputy. "You take the south trail. If he went that way, you and the posse can trap him in the canyons." He pulled his horse around and added, "It's important that you take him alive. He can tell us who's behind all these burn-outs."

"If we can get him to talk," Jordan said.

Roark said softly, surely, "He'll talk. He'll tell us anything we want to know, if it means saving his neck from a noose."

Roark watched his deputy move away in the darkness. Then he rode north, across a fire-blackened corner of Jordan's ranch, toward the Hassalt spread. He tried to concentrate on riding and on the small sounds in the darkness, but he couldn't keep the thoughts out of his mind. The pieces were fitting together now. All the little things were adding up and pointing straight up to John Hassalt.

Roark knew that Jay Stark hadn't taken the south trail. He had been trapped there once and he wouldn't try it again. And Roark knew why his deputy hadn't insisted on coming with him to the north. He hadn't wanted to be there at the finish. He hadn't wanted to look at Vivian Hassalt's eyes when they tied the guilt to her father.

Even in the pale moonlight, Roark was beginning to pick up sign now, and it still pointed straight to Hassalt. At least he made out the ranch house ahead of him. It was dark, but that didn't mean anything. As he got closer a light suddenly appeared in the front of the house. Roark knew that he had been guessing right all along, and the knowledge caused a big emptiness in his stomach.

THE gunman hadn't been far ahead of him. He had made straight for Hassalt, his boss. Probably Hassalt would fix him up with a fresh horse and supplies and send him out of the country. The gunman had outlived his usefulness. But that wouldn't be the important thing to Hassalt, for he could always pick up another gunman. The important thing was to see that Jay Stark didn't stay in Lazy Creek long enough to talk.

Roark left his horse by the barn and walked the rest of the way to the house. He moved quietly to the window that was lighted and stood as silent as the shadows, listening.

He heard Hassalt's voice inside. It sounded slightly querulous, as if the man were annoyed at having to get up at this hour. Then there was Vivian's voice, heavy with sleep, puzzled. Roark risked a quick look through the window. He saw Hassalt just returning from the front porch, his nightshirt tucked into his pants and a snub-barreled carbine resting in the crook of his arm. Vivian was standing just inside the doorway, wrapped in something heavy and white.

"I must be getting jumpy," Hassalt said. "I could swear I heard a horse moving out there."

Roark wondered where Jay Stark was. For a moment doubts crowded his mind. Maybe he had guessed wrong, after all. Maybe John Hassalt wasn't the man he was looking for, in spite of all the things that pointed to him. Roark wanted to believe that—and for a moment he did believe it.

But where was Stark? His trail had led straight to this place. Roark heard the wind rattle a large honeysuckle bush by the window. He thought it was the wind. That was a mistake.

For just an instant he glimpsed the dull gleam of the gunbarrel. It streaked down before he could leap aside, before he could make a sound. It crashed across his skull and pain streaked down his backbone. He grabbed but there wasn't anything to hold to. A big pool of blackness opened as he fell.

CHAPTER V

A Better Day Dawns

SOME time later Roark opened his eyes and flickering lamplight hit his eyeballs like hammers. He had been moved into the front room of the ranch house.

There were figures and voices in the room, but they didn't mean anything at first. Finally the figures stopped swimming and came into focus. There were three of them: John Hassalt, Vivian and Jay Stark. Roark closed his eyes again. He was crumpled uncomfortably in one corner of the room, but he didn't try to move.

He wasn't sure that he could move even if he tried.

Stark said something, and Roark was vaguely aware of Vivian's leaving the room. In a few moments she was back with a warbag full of supplies. Jay Stark laughed softly.

"All right, now go outside and saddle a fresh horse. The fastest animal you've got, and don't make a mistake about it."

Only then did Roark see that Stark was talking from behind a gun.

It took him a while to realize that things weren't exactly the way he had figured them. Hassalt was standing rigidly at the back of the room. There was fear in his eyes, but mostly there was hate. He spoke to his daughter without taking his eyes off the gunman.

"You'd better do as he says, Vivian."

Roark closed his eyes again and felt Vivian stare at him for an instant. Somehow, he knew that it was important that nobody knew he was conscious. She left the room quietly and went outside to do as the gunman had ordered.

Roark lay there and felt relief wash over him. Hassalt wasn't Jay Stark's boss after all. That was uppermost in his mind. Nothing else mattered. Vaguely, he wondered who the real boss was, but that wasn't so important now. He could wonder about that later.

HE BEGAN to piece things together now, and he could guess what had happened. Stark must have known that he was being followed. He had ridden right up to the ranch house and waited there by the honeysuckle bush. When his chance came he had put Roark out of the play with his gun barrel. Now the gunman had everybody where he could watch them. Everybody but Vivian, but he didn't have to worry about her as long as he had his gun on her father.

Through slitted eyes, Roark measured the distance between him to the gunman. With luck he could cover the distance in a couple of jumps and knock Stark off his feet before the gunman had time to blast him in half with that .44. But it would take a lot of luck. Too much luck, Roark decided. His best bet was to stay where he was. After the gunman had gone he could take up the chase again.

That was wishful thinking. If Jay Stark got out of Lazy Creek, he would be gone for good, and his secret with him. Then the ranching company would hire another gunman, and they would be right back where they started.

"You'll never get away with this, Stark." That was Hassalt, speaking tightly.

The gunman laughed easily. "I'll get away with it," he said. "With your help. It's been a pleasant stay in Lazy Creek, but it looks like it's time to be moving on."

There was strained silence for a moment. There was a sound of a horse outside. That would be Vivian getting a fresh mount for the gunman. Stark laughed again, well pleased with the way things were working out. Roark wondered where Matt Jordan and the posse were. It didn't matter, they wouldn't get here in time to help.

Hassalt said, "You must have got paid well for the job you did here for the ranching company."

Stark grinned. "Well enough," he said.

"A thousand dollars?" Hassalt asked carefully.

Roark didn't move, didn't breathe, as he

saw what Hassalt was getting at. Stark was merely a hired gun. He took money to work for the ranching company. Maybe for enough money he would be willing to work against them. Through carefully slitted eyes Roark saw the gunman thinking it over.

"A thousand dollars is a lot of money," he said at last. He listened again as a horse moved outside.

"I could raise it," Hassalt said. "Among the ranchers. It could be yours—if you wanted to earn it."

As Stark had said, a thousand dollars was a lot of money. It was clear that he hadn't made that much with the ranching company. He said, "I'm listening."

"All you have to do," Hassalt said, "is tell me who you've been working for. Who's the boss of the Southwest Ranching Company?"

Stark grinned, but not with humor. Under his breath he called somebody a dirty name. "Yeah," the gunman murmured. "It would serve him right. He killed one of my boys once. Maybe I ought to kind of pay him back for that."

Hassalt said again, grimly. "A thousand dollars, Stark, and a good word with the law—if they catch you."

The gunman had made up his mind. Roark could see it. But before he could say anything there was a sound on the front porch—a sound of boots, not the soft shoes that Vivian had been wearing. Stark heard it. He whirled toward the door. But he never completed his turn.

A GUN crashed outside in the darkness. The night lighted up as the bullet came into the room and slammed the gunman back, almost into Hassalt's arms. Then Jay Stark went down, his mouth working but no sound escaping him. Roark jerked up from the floor. But before he gained his feet the gunman was dead. Jay Stark would never burn another rancher out of business. And, Roark thought darkly, he would never tell who had hired him.

Then Matt Jordan stepped into the room, grim-faced, a little curl of smoke lazing up from the gun he held. He looked at the dead man and wiped his face with the back of his hand. He glanced at Hassalt and Roark and made a helpless motion with his hands.

"I didn't mean to kill him," he said hoarsely. "But when he wheeled toward me like that—well, it was just one of those things."

Hassalt kicked the carbine at his feet in silent anger, not anger at Jordan, or anybody in particular. It was only an act of frustration because Stark had never had a chance to speak. Vivian came through the doorway then, her eyes wide. She looked at Jordan, and there was fear on her face. She had never seen a man killed like that before.

Jordan turned to Roark and made that same helpless gesture with his hands. "On a hunch," he said, "I didn't go to the south like you told me to. I figured the posse could take care of things if Stark went that way. But he could have been leading you into an ambush if he found out that you were on his tail."

Jordan took out some makings and began to roll a cigarette. Roark felt pain stab at his brain, but there was something else, too. An idea was trying to get through. Suddenly, on impulse, Roark held out his hand and Jordan tossed him the makings.

But instead of rolling a smoke, Roark crossed over to the dead Stark and felt in his shirt pocket. There were makings for cigarettes there, too. Quickly, Roark examined the papers attached to both tobacco sacks. Jordan's were white, Stark's were brown wheatstraw. Then he searched his pockets until he found the two bits of paper that he had found down in the canyon. They were the same. One white and one brown.

Roark glanced up at his deputy. Jordan's face was pale. Then Roark glanced away, and that was his second mistake of the night. He should have gone for his gun.

He heard Vivian gasp, and when he turned back he was looking into the muzzle of Jordan's .44.

But Roark was too sick for fear, too numb to care much what happened next. The bits of cigarette papers had finally told their story. That day in the canyon when Sharpshooter and his boys jumped them, Roark had thought that Jordan and Stark had been fighting it out around the bend. Instead, they had been talking the situation over calmly. They had even had smokes together and had ground their cigarettes out on the spot. That was when Jordan had let the gunman get away without being seen. Then he had pretended to come to Roark's aid.

Hassalt stared, unbelieving. He tried to say something but the words stuck in his throat and the only sound he could make was a hoarse grunt. Instinctively, Roark's hand went for his gun. Jordan grinned. There wasn't any gun. Stark had taken it away from him after knocking him unconscious.

At last Hassalt got some words out. "Jordan, maybe you'll explain the meaning of this."

But the deputy said nothing. He was careful not to look at Vivian.

"Well," Roark said flatly, "What are you going to do now? You've killed two of your own men, Stark and Sharpshooter, to make sure they wouldn't talk. Are we going to be next?"

Jordan's grin was frozen on his face. His eyes were dull, hiding whatever was going on in his mind. He shook his head slowly. "Just you, Roark. Hassalt won't talk. He knows what would happen to his daughter. And Vivian won't talk for the same reason."

Vivian took a step, woodenly, like a sleepwalker. Jordan said sharply, "Stay back, Vivian. You and your dad will be all right."

But she took another step, watching Jordan's face. Matt Jordan turned his eyes away. He couldn't look at the hate and fear he saw in her face. But behind that look she was searching her mind, trying to explain to herself how she had made such a mistake about a man.

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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It was all clear now. Jordan had come into Lazy Creek, bringing his hired gunmen to set up the ranching company. He even bought a ranch and burned himself out. That was good. It threw off all suspicion. Then he got the deputy's job, and that made it perfect.

But there was one thing that Jordan hadn't bargained for. He had made a play for John Hassalt's daughter to set himself with one of the most respected families in Lazy Creek, and something had happened that he hadn't planned on. It showed on his face as he spoke harshly again to Vivian.

"Stand back, I say. Don't come any closer."

Roark wondered if such a man was capable of falling in love and studying Jordan's features, he decided that he was.

Roark stood rigid, seeing how it was shaping up in Jordan's mind. He wouldn't kill Hassalt because of Vivian. But he could kill Roark and keep the Hassalts quiet with threats. That was what he was going to do. Jordan took a step back, darting a glance at Vivian as she came closer.

"Stand back," he said again. "If you love your father, stay where you are."

Maybe she didn't hear him. Maybe she was too numb, or maybe bitterness had choked off all sense of reason. She came on, staring at him. Jordan couldn't take his eyes away. Roark knew he would never get a better chance, and he leaped.

He crashed head-on against Jordan, and the tremendous roar of the .44 jarred the room. Roark sprawled to the floor, hacking at Jordan's gun as he fell. He missed. Jordan lunged back, his lips pulled away from his teeth. Roark clawed to get up, but it was useless. The muzzle of that big .44 was coming down, the trigger finger squeezing.

Time froze. Time was not important now. All Roark could do was crouch there on all fours like some kind of animal, waiting, staring into the black muzzle. He tried to lunge again, but before his arms and legs could move, the gun roared.

Roark felt no pain. No bullet slammed into him. He stared, amazed, and saw Jordan jerk back and, the .44 dropped to the floor. Jordan fell slowly on top of it before Roark realized it wasn't Jordan's gun that had spoken. He darted a glance behind him and saw Hassalt kneeling, holding a smoking carbine. Jordan was looking at Vivian and shaking his head from side to side, as if he were trying to tell her something very important. But he never got to say it.

He shuddered, turned on his side and lay still.

QUIET hung over them briefly. Then, as the shock began to wear off, Vivian shivered as if she were cold, and hard little sounds tore themselves from her throat. Somehow Roark got across to her, put his arm around her and led her out of the room. John Hassalt was still kneeling, shaking his head in a dazed sort of way. He knew most of the story now, and what he didn't know he could easily guess.

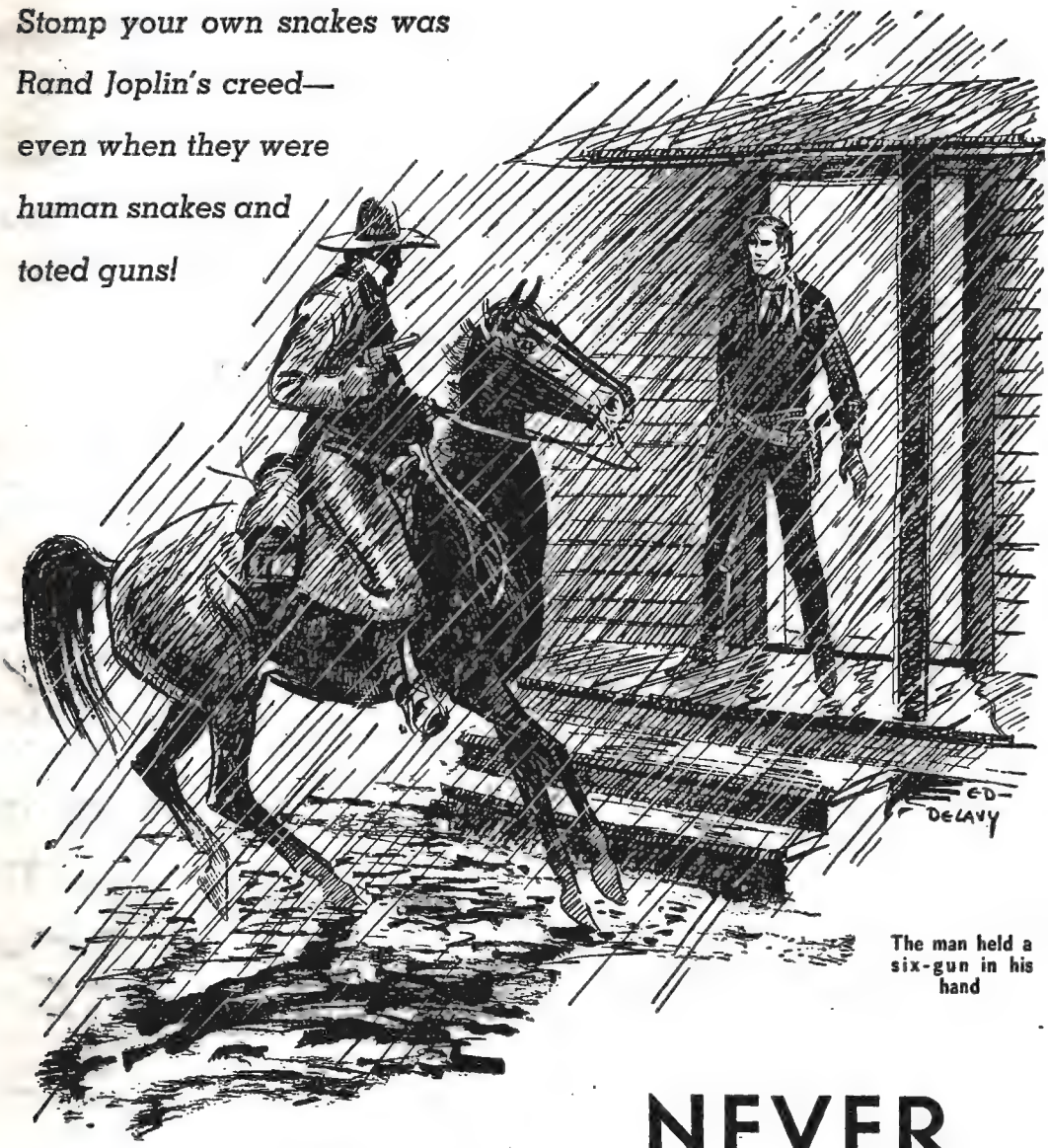
Outside, Roark held Vivian close and let her get it out of her system. He knew she wasn't crying for the man in there on the floor. Perhaps the tears were for the man Jordan might have been. Roark didn't know.

The night was almost over. It was deadly quiet and there was that sudden blackness that comes just before day begins to break. Well, a lot of things were over now. The ranchers still had plagues and droughts and diseases to worry about, but they wouldn't have any gunmen or ranching companies adding to their troubles.

The ones who had been burned out could hold on somehow and manage to make another start.

Suddenly the sky began to pale in the east and light from the hidden sun spread all along the horizon. Roak breathed deeply of the early morning air that was heavy with the wild smell of mesquite. He held Vivian closer, and yesterday's troubles seemed a long way behind. A new day was beginning.

Stomp your own snakes was Rand Joplin's creed— even when they were human snakes and toted guns!



The man held a six-gun in his hand

NEVER Come Back

By

GIFF CHESHIRE

RAND knew it was Judith climbing toward him from the creek bottom, a girl wild horses couldn't have dragged near him this past year. His face wore a puzzled look as he watched lightning split the sky above her and her mount. After the hot sultry day the thunderheads rolling in were no surprise; it was Judith's riding onto J-C grass again that interested him. He dropped a hand to the saddlehorn and waited.

Thunder rolled heavily in the distance. Another flash seemed to jab into the creek, far down its course. He saw Judith twist, stare upward and hurry her horse, and he remembered how an electrical disturbance had always alarmed her.

A puff of wind lifted behind as if to hurry her up the long slant. Rand saw her shirt flutter at her slim sides. He flung away his cigarette, wondering what he would say to the girl who by now could have been his wife had not loathing come to replace her starting love.

He could almost see her will work as she pulled down her horse and let it walk the last distance. It was the proud, unyielding will of the Hudnuts, a consuming force. She knew and detested the fact that he had seen her sudden abandon to fear. She couldn't bear to betray a weakness to him or anyone.

SHE WAS tall, erect in the saddle as she came up. Her hair was soft, a reddish-brown, and her amber eyes held depths that suggested something contradicting her roughened brown hands and firm jaw—a softness, a warmth he had known was real in the days when they were friends.

As if they had broken up only yesterday, or never at all, Judith said, "Hello, Rand. I was heading for your house until I noticed you up here." She kept her gaze on his eyes, her shoulders square. It wasn't bitterness in her exactly; it was more like plain contempt.

Rand had touched his hat, feeling the strangeness of that when once he would have kissed her. "Howdy, Judith. I figured it was you."

"Then you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Newt's back. He came home yesterday with a friend. They stopped over in town a while, and I figured you might have got word."

The muscles across Rand's shoulders tied in a knot. "I didn't know."

Judith waited a moment and, when he said no more, breathed, "So?" and that soft word carried the whole tortured question in her mind.

A few big drops of rain splattered down. In the far distance lightning struck and seemed to hit the mountain ridge. The sky was blackening all about.

Rand said, "The last time we talked it was about Newt. You didn't like what I had done and wouldn't listen when I tried to explain it. You put an end to everything between us."

"Newt's my brother. He's all I have."

"I told him to leave the country," Rand said. "I told him I'd kill him if he came back. That's the way it still lays. He knows that, don't he?"

"He's only a reckless boy."

Rand's lips flattened on his teeth. "How long do you figure to protect him with that fable? He's only a couple of years younger than you. And you ran your spread and took care of him for five years before I told him to clear out."

"Even so, it wasn't your place—!"

"We won't go into that again," Rand snapped. "Newt was rustling on me, and there were witnesses, Cal and old Windy Thompson. I figured it would be easier on you just to tell Newt to light his shuck. But old Windy let it get out so the whole country knew it. And they know I told Newt I'd gun him if he ever came back again."

"And your pride'll make you do it," Judith breathed.

Rand shook his head. "If Newt had any grow-up in him he'd know by now I did him a good turn. I always talked to him like a brother till he forced my hand. If he wanted to come home and start over he wouldn't be on the prod. Which he is, or you wouldn't be over here trying to persuade me to leave him be."

"You're absolutely set against him, aren't you?"

"He's all bad," Rand said. "He came back to call my hand, and he'll be to blame for what comes of it."

Not until then did the fine shoulders slope down in despair, and not till then did she speak without looking at him. "Rand, if you'll let him stay, if you won't force a fight, I think I can handle him.

I—I think I could forgive and forget the first part. I think—we could go back to where we were."

He had never seen a woman's pride swept completely away, and it was a thing he hated to see now. A steel hand seemed to grasp his throat when he said, "His forcing you to say that for his sake don't make me like him a bit better, Judith. I ain't the law. I'm willing to give any man a chance. I won't hunt for him, but I won't dodge, either. If we meet up, it'll have to be the way I told him it would be. This chance I'll give him. If he's changed, tell him to come and talk it over with me. If he hasn't but don't want trouble, tell him to keep out of my way."

He knew from the quick despair in her face that she considered that impossible. He saw the despair resolve into anger, the only thing left to her. The wind whipped a gust of rain across them. All about the dark clouds lowered tatters toward the earth.

He said, "It's going to cut loose in a minute, and you don't like an electric storm. Come down to the house with me and wait it out."

Her answer was to swing her horse and ride away. Then the full storm slashed down from the leaden sky. Rand sat motionless, bent across his saddle horn as if the weight on his shoulders were visible. He watched until she had disappeared into the rain-curtained woods at the distant creek, far below him, unaware that his clothes were being plastered to his body.

He had his back hunched to the rain as he spurred his horse down the muddy slope to the ranchhouse, barn and cattle shed, below on the creek bottom, a mile from where Judith had crossed. The ground already had puddled heavily with water. At the day corral he saw that Cal Calhoun, his partner, had come in from another part of the range.

Cal had kindled a fire under a kettle of cold beans and beef. He was older than Rand—near thirty—a man of loose, rough and durable parts. His mat of tangled hair was honey-yellow, his nose heavy, and the well-spaced eyes above it were blue. He gave Rand a silent look of greeting when the latter came into the kitchen from the porch.

RAIN drummed on the roof, and wet air swept in with Rand. He stood in sodden boots, swinging his hat to rid it of soaked-up moisture.

"Newt Hudnut's back," he said. His voice was flat now, resigned. There had been no decision to make, only acceptance to achieve, and he had accomplished that.

Except for a slight pinching at the corners of his mouth, Cal showed no response. They had never talked about it, though both had realized it was apt to come.

"I seen Ord Chatham up at the pinnacles," Cal said. "He was on his way home from town. The place is alive with talk, he says. Not only is Newt back but he brung a curly-wolf with him. A man he called Conbelt. The kind who don't feel good without the weight of a gun on both legs."

"Ah," Rand breathed. "So Newt's really jumped the reservation."

Cal grinned without humor. "It didn't take much of a jump. They got likkered up in town last night. Newt got to shooting off his face. He aims to find out if you're as tough as you pretend, and he's going to put Judith in her place too, and take over their spread. Talked against her something fierce, I hear. Claimed she'd always hogged the works because she was older than him."

Rand stared. "Then maybe she'll get her eyes open."

Cal shrugged. "*Quien sabe?* But I don't reckon it's easy to give up the last folks you've got as too rotten to claim. Judith poured her love out on the kid from the time she become responsible for him. I take my hat off to her. I can see why it turned her against you when you run him off. It's hard for her to see other folks don't have the patience to fool along with him the way she always had."

Rand pulled off his soaked shirt and spread it over a chair back to dry by the stove. He had a wide rangy frame, and his shoulders and arms were ridged with

heavy muscles. His craggy face seemed boyish under a shock of wet hair. It was a friendly face and only the eyes showed the iron will of the man.

HE MOVED restlessly to the window and stared out. The rain still fell, wiping out the distant hills, mantling the far peaks in heavy mist, packing the valley with the same misty clouds. It beat drearily in the ranchyard, cascading into the dried-out barrel at the woodshed corner, fretting the streaming water trough in the yellow-pooled yard. The horses in the corral hung their heads in dejection. It was a needed rain, but its effect on Rand was only to deepen his dreariness of spirit. It had hit him harder than he had ever figured it would.

There were so many things he remembered about Judith in the old, good days, her vitality and dreams, the young hungers that a responsibility shouldered too early had failed to press out of her. The faith she had placed so blindly in Newt was a good faith. It would go to the man she married and, if he deserved it, that man would be lucky beyond measuring.

Rand had hoped to be that man. She had hinted that he could be yet if he would yield in the stand he had taken. He felt a deep, compelling hunger to do that, and he forced it out of himself. What he had done had been for her benefit, and he didn't think he had been wrong. Having taken the stand, he couldn't back up unless Newt showed some signs of reforming himself. He had no hope that Newt would.

The gunslinging Conbelt was the key to the problem. If Newt had returned with fighting spunk, he was drawing it from Conbelt's support. Denied that backing, he might turn spineless and run again if threatened. Rand thought about Conbelt. Sometimes crossed shell-belts simply covered a yellow belly. Again they were backed by the deadliest kind of nerve. To have come home and made fighting talk so soon, Newt must know which kind Conbelt was.

They ate their beans and beef, neither hungry. Afterward, lingering over coffee, Cal said, "Well, do we go to town? That's where they'll want it to be, if I remember Newt."

"I'll tend my knitting a while," Rand said. "I promised Judith I wouldn't crowd it."

"Then you're foolish. The longer you wait, the louder Newt's going to talk."

"There's the thin edge of a chance Judith might be able to handle him."

"He'll make it look like you can't back your own threats."

"I can stand that."

The rain fell in swirling sheets as dusk ran in. It was a thundergust, beating the countryside with its tempest, heat and fork lightning alternately exploding to bring the ranchyard into a dazzling white brilliance. It brought a new uneasiness to the men in the battered house. Their cattle were mainly on the ungullyed plateau where there was little danger from flash flood-water. But the electrical violence would scatter them from one end of the range to the other, and the stuff was too spaced out to be close-herded. There was little use in riding out, though each man felt the itch in his saddle muscles.

The storm covered the sound, and Rand's first awareness of a horseman in the yard came in a lightning flash. He failed in those few seconds to recognize the huge slicker-covered shape in the saddle. He swung to the kitchen door and, as he opened it, the rider came up to the porch. The light from the door fell short of the newcomer. The man didn't swing down.

"Howdy," the man said. "You Joplin?" The voice was heavy, slow, without color.

"The same," Rand said, wondering at the wave of apprehension that rippled up his spine.

"They call me Conbelt," the man said in the same flat way. "Friend of mine sent me to tell you he'll be in town tonight."

"Come in, Conbelt," Rand said.

"Don't reckon you and me'd be good company for each other, Joplin. I don't like what I hear about you. Runnin' a kid off so you could marry his sister and

take over their property. Only it looks like she was too smart for you."

"Do you believe that, Conbelt?"

"Does it matter? Be in town before midnight or admit that you ain't got a stomach to match your tongue." Conbelt started to turn his horse, but at that moment Cal raised the lamp so the light streamed through the open dorway. Conbelt swung back, and now Rand saw for sure that the man had held a six-gun in his hand and had twisted his horse's head enough to conceal the weapon in the occasional lightning flashes.

Rand stared into a bearded, heavy, flat-planed face. Conbelt ducked his head enough that the hatbrim quickly covered his eyes, the instinctive gesture of a wanted man. Then he threw back his head and stared boldly. What had seemed a long black scar in the hairless area between beard and nose now showed rivulets the rain had not washed away completely. It was a deep scratch that had bled recently, and Rand wondered if it was this the man had tried to hide.

"So Newt wants it over with, does he?" Cal asked, coming up behind Rand. His voice was dangerous.

"That's right, bucko. He aims to run the cow spread his pretty sister turned over to him tonight, and he wants a free hand with it."

Rand had pulled himself an inch taller. "Judith wasn't fool enough to turn the spread over to him!"

"In writing," Conbelt's deadly voice intoned. He swung his horse then and went out of the yard at a mud-throwing clatter.

"That man's a killer," Cal said softly. "But not too bright. A fool'd know they've rigged something they're in a hurry to crowd you into. Newt wants a town fight to redeem his honor. And he wants it quick, before you catch him at even odds."

"Judith!" Rand breathed. "Surely she wouldn't go that far to get Newt to mind her."

"That's what Conbelt claimed."

"Then they forced her to. Cal, he had a scratch on his face. I'm going over there."

"Me too."

"No. This is my ruckus."

RAND donned gun and slicker, and paused on the porch a moment to turn up his collar. Bent against the wind-whipped rain he went down to the corral to catch and saddle a horse in the light of the lightning flashes. He rode out in the hard thick rainfall, concerned only about Judith. It was probable that Newt had waited in the offing while Conbelt rode in and that they had headed on toward town and the gunfight they hoped to bring off before morning. Whether they got it or not, Rand knew, depended on what he found at Judith's.

He followed the main trail, plunging through the wet brush that a dozen times offered the chance of ambush, fully aware that Conbelt's deliberately dropped information about the spread could have been meant for bait to lead him into one. He forded the creek at the gravel bar, hurrying his horse beyond as fast as he dared in the intermittent brilliance and blackness. The rocky trail fell swiftly behind him. Presently he swung at a sharp, dropping slant toward a far light he knew was the Hudnut house.

It was a small place where Judith lived alone after Newt's departure, except for the help she took on in summer when work was heaviest. She was alone now, and Rand saw her head and shoulders appear inquiringly behind the door glass as he thundered up to the porch. He called out in reassurance, "It's Rand, Judith!"

She came through the door as he swung down and climbed to the porch. Her hair was rumpled, and her shirt was torn. She caught at the tear in quick self-consciousness, and he knew she had expected no one or she would have repaired this visible evidence of recent violence.

"I'm glad you didn't think to fix it," Rand said. "Now maybe you won't deny they roughed you up."

It was a moment before she answered. Then she stepped back, saying, "Come on in, Rand. What brought you?"

"So you didn't know Conbelt meant to stop by to dare me to come to town."

Judith closed her eyes and for a moment strain showed starkly on her face, vanishing in sagging features that revealed her exhaustion.

"No!" she breathed. "They agreed—!" She shrugged and fell silent.

Rand pulled off his streaming slicker and left it on the porch. As he stepped inside, her glance dropped to the gun he wore. He put a finger under her chin and made her look up at him.

"It did no good for you to try to buy Newt off with an agreement to let him run things, Judith. And it looks like they had to use force to get it, at that. Tell me."

The resistance, the pride, everything seemed to go out of her together. Judith walked away, then turned and stared at him. "I guess you were always right, Rand. With my own brother standing by, I had to sign their paper to save myself from Conbelt. I never realized until that minute that Newt hates me."

A grim anger had climbed to Rand's face as he watched her, though he had suspected something of that nature. "The weak hate the strong," he grunted. "Because they envy the strong, and because of the strong's pity and contempt. Are you all right?"

"Yes. After I saw what was really in Newt, nothing mattered. I signed an agreement to turn the place over to him and leave the country. It's all right, Rand. I don't care, now. I'd rather go away."

"No!" he exploded. "They've got to get rid of me, too, and they aim to pile murder on top of this."

"What will you do?"

"Spring their damned trap."

"No! One of you would die!"

"So you're still concerned about him."

"He's still my brother. And you—" Judith faltered.

"What?"

She met his eyes then in the old firm, steady way. "You're the man I was in love with. Don't you see? You'd only worsen matters."

"I see just the opposite. Dodging matters don't help them. Lock the house, Judith, and if they come back don't let them in. Cal's on a tear about this thing. He'll give you all the help he can."

"I don't like the sound of that, Rand."

He left, making no move to take her in his arms as he wanted. He turned his horse down the town trail, the dreary rain still beating without let-up. The trail would take him past his own place, and he meant to stop and have a last word with Cal, knowing that morning might find Cal the only close friend Judith had left. But the place was dark and deserted when he got there. Cal's six-gun was gone from its peg by the kitchen door. His lips pinched, Rand swung up again and started for town.

The rain kept up when, two hours later, he rode into the place, which lay wet and weary and exhaled a sogginess that rose about him. The street was a muddy running creek from one end to the other, bordered by closed stores and shops and palely lighted hotels and saloons. The jeweler's big clock, dimly illumined by a street lamp, showed him he was nearly an hour ahead of the midnight deadline Conbelt had given him. He forced himself to take his drenched, hard-ridden horse to the livery and order the proper care for it.

"Calhoun?" the hostler said, in response to Rand's question. "Yeah, he's in town. I got his horse back there." The man made a motion toward the musty darkness in the rear of the building.

"Thanks. I know where to look," Rand said.

Though the sprawled little town served as a meeting place for cowhands, drifters and homesteaders for miles around, the storm had swept the board walks clear. Yet Rand knew the saloons would be fuller than usual tonight, for word of Newt Hudnut's return and loud-mouthed talk would have traveled far.

A MAN in a sheepskin coat was hunched in cold discomfort on the covered hotel porch. He rose as Rand came by, calling, "Rand!" and came down

the steps. Rand recognized Tod Buell, whose spread joined Judith's on the side across from J-C. He grunted, "Howdy, Tod," and waited.

There was urgency in Buell's manner. "You can forget your trouble with Newt Hudnut, Rand," he said with sharp-edged insistence. "Cal walked up to that tough Conbelt and gave him till eleven-thirty to get out of town. Cal's over at the Rialto. Conbelt and Newt are in the Big Wheel. And there's only twenty minutes left. Cal told me to watch and tell you you've got too blamed much at stake to mess with polecats."

Rand had pulled straight, twin furrows deepening on his forehead. "Who gave him license to cut in on it?"

"Look," Buell said patiently, "Judith poured her heart and soul into that no-good brother. Newt's already told around that he took the spread away from her. So you're the only one on earth who might keep her on her feet. Let Cal tend to Conbelt, and I don't reckon Newt'll be much trouble. You've got till midnight, Rand. Wait and see if there's any need for you to go over to the Big Wheel."

Rand shook his head wearily. "I kill my own snakes, Tod. And I've got till any damn time I choose to go over to the Big Wheel. Which is now. I told Newt I'd gun him if he came back, and he's back. Conbelt doubled the ante when he dared me to come in tonight. I can't let that slide."

"Don't let your pride ruin your chances of making Judith forget and be happy in time!"

Rand grinned coldly. "Don't try to pin me down here till it's over, Tod," he said mildly, then he went on up the street.

The town's inactivity seemed ominous now, the mood heightened by the unending racket of the storm. Yet the faces Rand saw through this window or that door told him by their strained gravity that word was around that he had come in. The excited, almost morbid curiosity with which men greeted such occasions would have been intensified by the double prospect and the question of whether Rand would wait and let Cal have first chance at Conbelt.

It was not pride alone that drove Rand, and he had a real wish to take this favor from his partner and friend. Yet the force that kept his boots hitting the drenched boards with steady purpose welled from within himself, a moderate but self-reliant man's need to face and solve his own problems. And as surely as he knew he could not farm out his own difficulties, he knew that Judith could not correct her mistake through the action or inaction of another. No person could solve his life problems through somebody else.

Down at the street's less respectable end, he could see the Big Wheel, its name taken in memory of some bygone freight wagon. He thought of Judith, alone, frightened, torn, and was himself steadied. He knew that by now the word had reached the Big Wheel, and probably every other saloon and congregating place in town. He had distrusted the situation into which Conbelt and Newt had baited him and he still did. Either Conbelt was so proven a gunman that his chances against a less practised man were overwhelming, or they would try for some sort of cross play to pack the odds in their favor.

He was still at some distance when light fell from the Big Wheel's opening door. A man came out, stared briefly up the walk and ducked back inside. No one but Rand had as yet moved along the main street, but Rand knew the word probably had reached the Rialto, that Cal might have jumped up his schedule and set out to enter the Big Wheel by the rear door. Rand had no objection to that, for a proved friend on the sidelines could be invaluable in what was coming.

It was easier, more casual than he had expected when he stepped into the Big Wheel. The quiet sorting and sifting that had gone on in the last few minutes was plain to see. The bartender had found excuse to leave his place. The bar itself had cleared, though half-empty glasses stood along its dark length and the tables in the foreground were unwontedly de-

serted. Rand stopped just inside the door, his streaming slicker as yet buckled and his gun out of sight.

At the far end of the oblong room Conbelt sat at a table with Newt. They were by themselves, a bottle and glasses before them, some scattered cards and poker chips on the table top. Two adjoining tables were thinly occupied, the players sitting uneasily in pushed-back chairs, wanting to rise and shove away but held by self-consciousness.

Conbelt faced Rand directly, Newt sitting at a slight angle. The latter's features were wooden and he held his head up arrogantly. A poorly shaded lamp hung just this side, and this Conbelt must have apprized when he took place, for the glare obscured his face a little. But Rand could see the small, unblinking eyes, the flat cheeks above the beard, the scratch that Judith's nails had put there. That settled him into a full acceptance of this moment. He unlatched his slicker, shrugged out of it, and tossed it onto a pile of others draining into a growing puddle by the door.

The loud wall clock in the back bar showed it was eleven-twenty, ten minutes before the deadline Cal had given Conbelt. Rand regarded the clock a second, shaping his plan.

There was nothing showy in the way he crossed to the bar. He threw a dollar loudly onto the bar, the clink heavy in the room's hush, but it failed to draw forth the bartender. Rand shrugged, picked up the coin and dropped it back into his pocket. He swung easily, a thumb hooked in his belt above his gun. He surveyed the faces turned to him in absorption, seeing friends, acquaintances, strangers, but no enemies save the pair at the end of the room.

Then he flung a brief glance toward Newt Hudnut. His voice was matter-of-fact. "In ten minutes Calhoun will come, Newt. He'll have his go with your tough friend. If he's lucky that'll leave you and me, something I don't reckon you figured on. But you just set there till that affair's over unless you mean to come up with your gun."

Newt swallowed and Conbelt was scowling. Both had their hands in sight. Conbelt threw his weight back in his chair and sent Rand a long, hard stare.

"Bucko," Conbelt said, "I don't like your cut. I don't like a schemin', low-down son who tries to take advantage of a woman. I don't like a two-bit tough who takes glory in runnin' a kid outta the country. I don't like your talk right now."

Rand's skin paled but he kept his features undisturbed. "No smoke, Conbelt. If you've still got a quarrel fifteen minutes from now, maybe we can go into your likes and dislikes. Newt, he isn't going to bait me into standing in front of his gun the way you figured. There's a good chance he won't be around at all when you and me have our set-to. You want to risk that on your lonesome? Or would you rather tear up that paper you made your sister sign, get on your horse and clear out of this country for good? It's your say."

NEWT swallowed again, and Conbelt growled something at him in an undertone. It was obvious that Cal's buying chips in the game had thrown Newt off-stride, for he cut an anxious glance at the clock whose loud ticking was suddenly audible throughout the room. He scowled and tried to stiffen his features, but that clock was cutting away the minutes in which he could be certain of this professional gunman's protection. Through a moment's silence each tick seemed to deepen the tension in his face.

Suddenly he flung his scowl at Conbelt. "Damn you, Calhoun's no threat to me! What're you waiting for?"

Conbelt slapped his hands flatly on the table and came up. Newt rose in a cautious twist. A bleak despair running through him, Rand let his feet spread slightly. He had pulled his thumb free, but his hand stayed by his belt. Conbelt kept his hands still but the fingers were hooked downward as he stepped clear of the table. Rand had both men to watch, and Cal wasn't due for another five or six minutes.

Conbelt paced around the table and came into the clear where he halted. He stared across at Rand. "The kid's right. Calhoun's cheap heroics ain't nothing to me. Newt and me've been pards. His squabbles is my squabbles. Fill your hand, Joplin, or tuck your tail and get outta here."

Then the man's clawing hands went down for his guns.

The right one had barely cleared its holster and the other hadn't started when Rand slapped the butt of his gun. He eared back, pulled and squeezed the trigger as the barrel swung up from the leather. His draw was cooler than Conbelt's showy double motion, and so was a shade the faster. He heard the gunman's bullet whip past his ear even as his own gun's roar rocked across the big room.

He thought he had missed also until he saw the strain with which Conbelt tried to swing the other gun on up into line. Then a shudder of doubt ran across the flat face. Conbelt let out a thin cry, his right hand loosening its grasp, the gun falling. The other followed, and Conbelt went down slowly, his head making an unbroken *splat* against the floor.

With every muscle in his body pulled tight Rand swung a look at Newt, who hastily displayed his empty hands and emitted a bleat. Its barrel wisping smoke, Rand's gun was still in his hand. He stepped slowly toward Newt.

"Pull your gun easy and lay it on the table, Newt," Rand said. "Put that paper your sister signed there with it. Then travel. This time I won't threaten you if you come back, because you won't. Every man here has seen what a blathering coward you are. And what a fool, letting that thing make you think he was a gun-swift."

NEWT made one brief try to bring bluster into his face, then the will ran out of him. He pulled his gun gingerly and tossed it onto the card table. A folded piece of paper came out of a shirt pocket and followed. He tried to swagger as he walked the length of the saloon, then broke and bolted out the door.

Cal Calhoun stepped through the door a minute later, a grim set to his face. He came up to Rand and said, "Tod Buell told me you dealt me out of it. But it took some doing waiting to see if my turn would come up at eleven o'clock. I see you've cleaned out your snake nest. Let's go home."

Without looking at the unstirring figure on the floor, Rand started for his slicker by the door. He was heavy, slow-motioned, which was the result of not having known the real calibre of the man he had faced. But he knew the calibre of the girl he was riding to, the girl who gave full faith and support to a man she loved. Knowing her mistake now, Judith would be healed by the balm of time. He walked out into the storm with his friend.

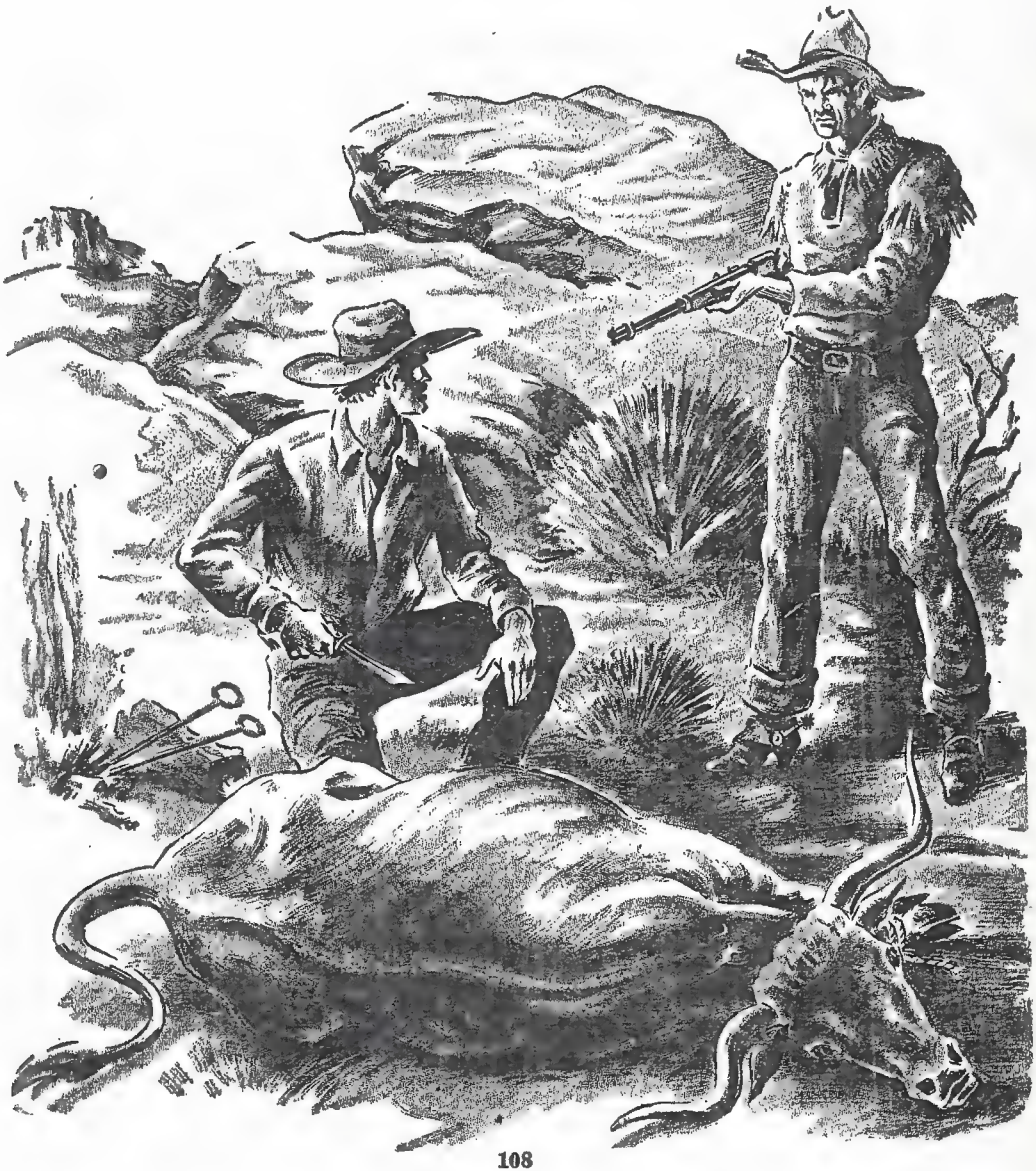
HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR WEST?

Counting each question as worth 20 points, you'll really be ridin' high, wide and handsome if you can get all five and score 100. If you rate 80, with four correct answers, you're still a top hand on anyone's ranch. Three, or 60, entitles you to a place at the grub pile, but less than that, you're a tenderfoot. Let's go! Answers are on page 126—if you MUST look!

1. **What is a bumper gate?**
2. **In the Frontier army posts, how did the various soldiers distinguish Infantry bugle calls from Cavalry?**
3. **Why was 1871, when 600,000 head of cattle were tallied, Abilene's last big year as a cattle shipping center?**
4. **The Alamo, famous in Texas history as an unsuccessfully defended fortress, was used originally for what purpose?**
5. **What invention, without which the West would never have been conquered completely, rates alongside the six-shooter, barbed wire and the windmill?**

TOUGH TOPHAND

He was just one lone cowboy against a horde of killers and land-grabbers, but his fury held them off



A Complete Novelet by DEL RAYBURN

CHAPTER I

The Injun Sign

HONDO UVALDE was riding the blue roan, his favorite colt in the string he was breaking and training for the S Slash S, up in Montana, when he sighted the big red three-year-old bull. He was up in the rough foothill brakes above the Sun River, ten miles from where any of old Sun River Sam Shackelton's Durhams were supposed to be. And that bull's glossy hide was as slick and unblemished by any S Slash S brand as it had been the day he was born.

So the Texan tied onto him. And that took some doing. The blue roan showed he had the makings of a real top. He went down off a sixty-degree slide-rock slant at a dead run, as if it were level ground. He broke through brush and jackpine as if nothing was there, put Uvalde up where he could fit one to that fast traveling big red's horns.

But the colt had never before been tied onto anything heavier than a long yearling. He got jerked flat.

That colt learned fast though. The second time the big red hit the end of Hondo's hard-and-fast thirty-foot line the blue roan's tail had taken root on the mountain. Mr. Bull got busted fair and flat.

And a mighty good thing, too. For Hondo wasn't in the saddle. He looked about due to run second in a short but mighty fast foot race that might have been his last. And the young Texan's face looked like nothing even a mother could ever love. He had landed on it after that first bust had separated him from the saddle, and unexpectedly put him in the proper position for entering that foot race.

The big red wasn't going any place after the second fall, however. That time the punishment had not been divvied up. He was mighty gentle for about a minute after taking that jolt. Uvalde had him wrapped up, a little fire going, and a copper cinch-ring heating before the heavy Durham moved another muscle.

About the time the big red began rolling his eyes and roaring his rage at such treatment, Hondo's bloody, skinned-up face and bruised muscles began coming to life. He and the bull were about a match for disposition. He drew a signboard-sized S Slash S on the bull's broad

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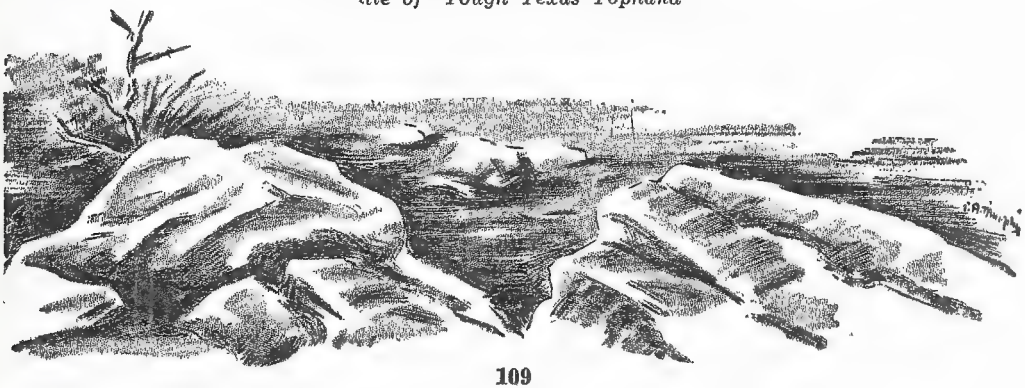

red side with the smoking running-iron.

BY THE time the chore was finished both man and beast were ready to fight. And then the Texan looked up to find himself under the steady menace of a Winchester. Without a warning sound buckskin-clad Brig Murphy had materialized from the brush a half-dozen yards away at the edge of the little clearing. Uvalde eyed the fellow with the friendliness of a she-cougar with new triplets.

"Take that cussed gun off me before I ram it down your gullet with no chewin'!" the Texan snarled, his mouth a hard line in the mask of drying blood and dirt he was wearing for a face.

Dropping the running-iron, Uvalde fished out his jack-knife, ignoring the other man as he slashed an over-slope from the bull's right ear, an under-slope from the left.

"Is that a custom in Texas, or just one of your own ideas?" Murphy inquired. "We never seen it done before here in Montana."

"Ear-markin'?" Hondo snorted, pocketing the ear-crops for tally, following them with his knife when the bloody blade had been cleaned on his pants leg. "They was doin' it long before I was foaled. In Texas. But that's cow country! They handle cattle, not little shirt-tail herds of milk stock like up here. I been whittlin' on Shackleton's calves this spring because I wanted these colts to get some actual rope work in the open. Ear-markin' ain't the bother range brandin' is."

"We been watchin' you since you rode up from the Yellowstone, and hired on with Shackleton last fall," Murphy declared. "We've seen there's several things we don't know about cow work. And we figure we better learn 'em because Montana'll equal Texas for bein' cow country one of these here days. That big herd you Texans drove up to Nels Story's Yellowstone ranch last year won't be the last.

"And them that don't know how to handle more'n little shirt-tail herds, as you call 'em, wore-out work cattle picked up along the emigrant trails, like we got, or Durhams drove in from Oregon or California like Shackleton's, they'll get pushed off the grass by your Texas-sized herds. Us Murphys want to be ready to hold our grass and handle cattle with the best of 'em. We'd like you to throw in with us. This here Sun River is a mighty nice piece of country to start out with, don't you figure?"

"If you like nine months winter and three late in the fall," Uvalde snorted. "I'm long gone for Texas, mister, the day these colts'll pass for cow horses." He dropped to one knee beside the bull. "If you're done palavering' you'd better travel. I'm lettin' this bull up."

"Hold it!" The buckskin man's tone hardened to a steely, cutting edge. "I ain't totin' this gun for no ornament. I've took your fine-haired Texas talk because I want us to get along. But if that's out then I aim to shoot you right there in your fancy tracks. You can't fool around with a Mormon woman and get off clean to brag about it. Or maybe you figured you'd steal her, take her along when you pull out for Texas?"

Surprise knifed through Hondo. His gray eyes flashed up to cover Murphy in a searching gaze. They eyed each other steadily. And for the first time the Texan, Hondo Uvalde, realized he was up against a tough proposition.

Big Brig Murphy's yellow eyes returned his gray stare with unwavering calmness. Those yellow eyes could glow cold and calculating with killer lust. They were the wise and somehow mockingly confident eyes of a lobo. Brig Murphy could be just as tough or as cunning as he looked. And as deadly.

His hair was thick and black. His chin was hard and jutting, uncompromising. He was lantern-jawed. His nose was high-bridged. Across his right cheek in the swarthy skin of his face blazed the livid track of an old knife wound. He was clean-shaven, but his hard jowls were dark blue-black.

Hard usage had worn away most of the fringe on Murphy's buckskin shirt. The

legs of his skin pants were slick and black with accumulated grease. They stretched taut around hard-muscled thighs. He stood six-foot-five in his moccasins. Even Hondo's rawhide, six-two frame, boosted by two-inch high-heeled boots, and with high-crowned hat adding more height, seemed a little on the undernourished side by comparison.

"So that's why you stepped out with a gun lined on me when you showed up for this little confab?" Hondo murmured with understanding.

"I've cold-trailed that Martha and been peekin' over the skyline a time or two at you two's 'accidental' meetin's," Murphy nodded. "I've waited too long for just this setup for this talk to risk you gettin' impulsive and spoiling it."

MURPHY'S hard lips pulled back in a mocking grin. The show of gleaming big buck teeth gave him even more the appearance of a taunting lobo. Then he voiced the thought behind the action.

"Of course, if you was to throw in with us, I reckon it might be arranged for you to have that tomboyin' little wildcat. Though she's been claimed since she was so-high. The Old Man's kept us boys and the cousins whipped away from her and she'd been a new wife of his long ago if he had the nerve to tame her. But I got an idea he wouldn't mind a chance to get shut of his claim to her if it was worked just so, with him losin' no face."

"Martha's not your sister then—or relative?"

"Her folks happened to grief on the Oregon Trail a long time ago. But that's no never-mind of yours just now. What'll it be?"

"I could say I'll throw in and double-cross you later," said Hondo.

"Maybe." Murphy nodded. "Only we're givin' you the privilege of puttin' Shackleton out of the way so's we won't be bothered by neighbors in this Sun River country. Just to prove you're playin' it our way. And if you say yes to the deal today and then welch on your bet, you can blame well know Martha'll pay for your lie, even if your hide's slipperier than we figure, and you get away somehow. She'd never amount to a hoot as a Mormon wife anyhow, so we'd lose nothin'."

Looking into the placid yellow eyes, Hondo knew Murphy was not bluffing. It was up to the Texan to play his string out here and now. Lying to get out of this tight, as the Mormon had promised, would involve Martha in the clan's vengeance. And that hard-riding, blue-eyed, wind-browned little tophand was the one girl Hondo Uvalde was willing to go to the ends of the earth for.

Since their first accidental meeting, three months before, when Hondo had been making one of his first long rides on the Shackleton colts, their meetings had become premeditated and regular. And Hondo had found himself living from one to the next.

Long ago they had made it up that she would be beside him when he pulled out for Texas, some dark night. They had been waiting only until the sign was right. Now it seemed perhaps they had waited too long.

Hondo leaned forward slightly. His fingers touched the pigging string. Working at it with no movement Murphy could see, he began a rush of words to cover up and hold the killer's attention.

"The way I hear it," he said, "you Murphys ain't real Mormons a-tall, but left Utah one dark night a jump ahead of Danites ridin' to clean out your Jack Mormon kind, takin' all the wives you could come by but payin' no tithes to the church, and no mind to its laws. I'd think you bronc Mormon sons'd—"

The tie came loose. Hondo jerked the rope clear and ducked forward into the scant protection of the Durham's big body. Just in time. A bullet burned across the bunched muscles of his shoulders, and the bull roared new rage as if the hot lead had touched his hide too.

The animal kicked dirt in the Texan's battered face as he lunged up, bawling for blood. Hondo came up with him, a

firm grip on the Durham's heavy tail and a painful kink in it for leverage to steer the creature by. He headed the big red straight at burly Brig Murphy.

*Murphy tried frantically to lever an*other shell into the chamber, hoping to drop the bull. But the distance was too short. At the last moment he dropped the rifle, tried to dodge and run. But the Jack Mormon killer had waited too long.

Murphy let out a strangled yell as the bull hit him. The savage horn tips missed him but he was snatched from his feet, slammed down across the bull's broad head and neck. The big red tried to toss him. With a croaking gasp he hit the ground under the heavy bull's pounding hoofs.

When Murphy came to, a good two minutes after the Durham slammed into the brush beyond and disappeared, he found Hondo eyeing him over the barrel of his own Winchester. For a moment there was fear in his blazing yellow eyes as he struggled to get his lungs working again.

HONDO waited until Murphy finally got his first full breath. Then he squeezed the carbine trigger, sent a bullet slamming into the ground so close to the fellow's moccasined foot that Brig jumped with shock. The fear in his yellow eyes blazed one last time, then turned to cold hatred.

"Shuck out of them filthy skins," Hondo directed. "I'm goin' to be sure you got no sneak weapons. And I reckon it'd be fittin' to send you home in the kind of clothes a heathen like you ought to wear. Shed 'em quick, or the next lead'll burn you like you burned my shoulders. Cuss you!"

Too short of breath to speak, the Jack Mormon began pulling off his buckskins. When he stood naked Hondo backed him off and gathered up the greasy clothing. The Texan tossed the garments upon the smoldering embers of the little branding fire. The fire burst into renewed life, greedily consuming the greasy fuel. Dry, harsh, soblike curses tore their way across Murphy's grim lips.

"Maybe you're as tough as you think, Texas man," he gritted, choked with anger, "but you'll never live to see your *damned Texas again. Not after this.* I won't be playin' it lone-handed next time."

"I'll keep your skinnin' knife and carbine to remember you by—Cupid!" Hondo taunted. "Now hit the brush like the coyote you are, or directly I'll quit feelin' generous and shoot you like you'd do for me. Your smell's turnin' my sensitive stomach. Get!"

CHAPTER II

Death Rides the Skyline

HONDO UVALDE was out of the wild brakes, down in the open grassland along the river, when he met Martha Murphy. As always, even in her old r i d i n g clothes, scuffed-up brush leggings over faded but clean and neatly mended canvas pants, and boy's shirt under an old buckskin vest, she made a blue-eyed picture that quickened his breath and lightened his spirits.

Right away Martha was concerned about the Texan's face and wanted to know how it got that way.

"Whose farm you been plowing, cowboy?" was her way of putting it.

She reined up her high-lifed pony, but his blood was up and before she got him settled down he had made a fidgety, dancing circle around behind Hondo.

"Me and this blue agate pony roped us a bull up there in the roughs." The Texan grinned wryly against the pain the movement of muscles in his skinned-up face caused.

"Oh, so you know about *that.*"

"Know about what?"

"Don't pretend with me, cowboy," Martha chided. "Maybe you'd better tell me what. Like what you're wearing that bullet rip across your shoulders for?"

"Because that's as near as your brother

Brig, who ain't your brother at all he tells me, could come to killin' me," said Hondo.

"I should have warned you to stay out of there," Martha declared in a tone of self-reproach. "How you ever managed to ride out alive is what I can't understand. I rode looking for you today to tell you that you must get out of the country. That's certain now. You've got to get away before it's too late."

"It's *we* that's goin' to do the gettin' away," Hondo corrected.

"No!" the girl declared urgently. "It's too late for that now. Look!" She turned in her saddle, pointing to the skyline. The figure of a waiting horseman was silhouetted there. "They watch every move I make lately. They'd be after us before we had enough of a lead to get away. You've got to ride away alone, cowboy, while you can. But I'll wait for you. Or die trying."

"What do you think is up anyhow, sis?" Hondo wondered.

"I don't know. But something—terrible, I'm afraid. They're like a pack of savage animals, no conscience or honor or anything. We're the only whites within fifty miles, so Mr. Shackleton always hired Brig and some of the older boys whenever he needed help. He trusted them to do his calf branding, and they just took advantage of it to pick the best calves for themselves and run them back there in the roughs when they were weaned."

"So that bull ain't the only Durham back in them hills!" Hondo exclaimed. "Maybe that's why Shackleton hired me. So now what's up?"

"I don't know. But Stub rode in last night. He's the only runt in the Murphy bunch, but he's got just as much bad in him as any, only it's worse for being condensed in so much smaller a package. He made up in gun and knife skill what he lacked in brute strength, in learning to hold his own with the others. Now he's the worst killer of them all. He's been working as a trouble shooter on the railroad grade crew down in Nebraska, and I don't know how many men he's killed. He wouldn't have come back unless the old man sent for him. I'm afraid maybe—"

Martha broke off, leaving her real anxiety unspoken. But her thought was plain to Hondo.

"Afraid maybe they want me out of the way," he finished for her. "Well, sis, a Texas man never rides away from trouble. If anybody's goin' to be afraid, let it be them. When I leave this range, we'll

Juvenile Jackpots

EVEN LITTLE CHILDREN "mined" real gold in the helter-skelter days of 1848, when the rush was on in full swing in California. But their method—which earned the kids as much as $14 per day—was far simpler than the type employed by the grownups.

It consisted of getting down on the hands and knees in front of busy hotels like the United States, and worrying the ground with a good sharp knife. Soon enough, a clod of earth would be wrested free. This was crumbled in pudgy but experienced little hands, and the fine sand blown carefully out of the way. What was left was specks of the purest gold. This was placed in a sheet of paper, and the whole process repeated.

Another method of juvenile "mining" required the help of an ordinary pin. The head was licked by a small determined tongue and applied to the clod. The gold speck stuck quickly, and was removed.

None of these youngsters speculated very deeply as to how the gold got there in the first place, but it was probably due to unavoidable leaks from miners' bags, store sweepings, and the like. ***—Bess Ritter***

be ridin' together."

"No!" the girl protested. "I'll marry one of them so you won't want me, before I'll let you stay here and get killed!"

"*That'd just be puttin' yourself out for* nothin', sis," Hondo drawled. "Because I'd ride into their camp and make a widow of you before you had time to begin the chores of a wife. Besides, I'd play the string out here even if you was back in Texas waitin' for me. There's some things a man don't do. Leavin' a man in a tight when he's done right by you is one of 'em. I got a hand to play here for Shackleton. You ride on in to the ranch with me and we'll make medicine with him. One thing I know—we can sure use a cook, and that'll get you where them black lobos can't bother you."

But Martha reined away, shaking her head.

"That would just bring them down on top of you before you were ready to make a fight," she said. "You'd better get word to your Texas friends down on the Yellowstone before this shindig opens. I've taken my own part against that bunch for a long time now. A little longer won't make much matter."

Hondo tried to argue her out of it but got no farther than she had in trying to persuade him to leave the country before the trouble broke. In the end they rode their separate ways. . . .

THE Shackleton home ranch consisted of a two-room log cabin with a sod roof, a little lean-to shed barn with a corral, and a mile of rail fence boxing in a little horse pasture. When Hondo sighted it in the light of the waning day, the place seemed to have a desolate air, a deserted look. He wondered where old Sun River Sam could be, why there was no smoke from his supper fire.

The blue roan finished the last lap at a lope.

At the barn, Hondo found another surprise and puzzle. In one of the stalls was a strange horse, looking leg-weary. On the pole partition was a pack-saddle loaded with a good camp outfit.

The Texan had just stepped into the corral to pull his saddle off the blue roan colt when he caught the beat of approaching hoofs. He had Brig Murphy's Winchester *in his hands and suspicion in his* eyes when a stranger rode up.

But somehow he felt foolish when he had looked the stranger over. For one thing there was a good-sized string of trout in the follow's hand. He looked like little more than a button, but there was a glint of gay confidence in his blue eyes. And the horse packing him was a good one in any country.

"There was no one around when I rode in a little after noon"—the young stranger, grinned when he reined up outside the corral— "so I decided to try'n rustle up a little somethin' towards supper."

He held up the string of fish with a pleased look on his beardless face.

"Looks like you done right well towards earnin' your way," Hondo declared. "Light and rest your saddle. That's a good lookin' pony you got."

"I caught all these fish sittin' on him," the rider said, stepping down. "Takes to water like a duck. Call him Niobrara."

Hondo saw that the stranger wore a buscadero belt, Mexican-made, the dark leather finely handworked, an article seldom seen except on the Border.

"Nebraska bronc, hum?" Hondo asked. "How's that railroad comin', down in that country?"

"Railshead'll be a good ways west of Cheyenne before snow flies again," the young rider said. The smile was still on his lips, but into his eyes had come a wary look like that of a man with his guard up. "You acquainted with Nebraska?"

"I've just heard of the Niobrara River," Hondo replied lightly.

He was remembering Martha's mention of a runty killer of the Murphy clan newly arrived from Nebraska and the grade camps there. But he kept his speculation to himself.

"I'll hustle on up to the cabin and start throwin' a bait of grub together while you tend your bronc," he said. "I've got

a ride to make tonight, so if it's all the same we won't take time to clean fish tonight but keep 'em for morning."

At the cabin the Texan found sign that Shackleton had departed hurriedly, although nothing had been left to indicate his reason or destination. But so far as Hondo was concerned it mattered little. From Brig's talk he was certain the Murphys had not moved against Shackleton yet. Therefore his absence was no cause for concern. The important thing was to get to the Mullan Road, get a message to his Texas saddle-mates on the next stage south.

Supper was a silent affair, Hondo and the young stranger each seeming preoccupied with their thoughts. The stranger was the first to break the silence, when the Texan finished eating first and started to push away from the table.

"I'm just ridin' through and don't want to be any bother to you," he said, "so don't mind me."

HONDO'S skinned face relaxed into a grimace that was meant to pass for a grin.

"Forget it. In this forsaken country the strangers that ride through in a year can be counted on your fingers. Of one hand. Considerin' that there's only one other outfit of whites within a day's ride, other than the stock-tender at the Eagle Rock Station down on the stage road, somebody new is sure no bother to talk to. Especially considerin' that the other outfit of whites is an ornery unsociable Jack Mormon clan that figures even one neighbor is too many and is gettin' ready for a try to get us out of their way."

"Jack Mormons, did you say?"

Hondo nodded. "So if I was you I'd find some place to cache my bed out in the open, come dark. But at least you can take a meal or two from a stove for a change. If you want to drift on."

"It wouldn't be that one of them unsociable Jack Mormos is a yellow-eyed runt that's too handy with his guns—when he's got a pat hand, would it?" asked the young stranger, narrow-eyed.

"The whole outfit has eyes that look like they'd glow in the dark—coyote or lobo, I don't know which," Hondo muttered. "And just today I heard tell of a gun-handy runt showing up at their camp. Fresh from Nebraska." He glanced at the gathering dusk outside. "Well, I got to be ridin'. If you care to stick around I'll see you around daylight. If you don't, well—*adios*."

Fried trout awaited Hondo for breakfast when he rode back to the Shackleton ranchhouse as dawn colored the eastern sky the next morning. His eyes were red-rimmed from sleeplessness, and he was bone-tired, his body saddle-weary and stiff from old bruises of the day before. But his spirits lifted at sight of the smoke from the cabin chimney, and still more when he found the good meal ready for him.

"The boss' wife died, so he had to go to Benton and there's no tellin' when he'll be back, Nebraska," Hondo told the young stranger. The stocktender at the stage station had furnished him the information. "If you want to stick around, maybe he'll be able to use you when he gets back."

That was all that was ever said about that, but an unspoken understanding seemed to have formed between them. Both had unfinished business with members of the Murphy clan.

CHAPTER III

Snake Tracks

ONE afternoon, over a week later, a heavily laden buckboard pulled into the isolated ranch. Holding the lines, his face drawn with new lines of age, shoulders slumped as if under the weight of suddenly added years, was Sun River Sam Shackleton, a sad contrast to his usual easy-going and lighthearted self.

But to Hondo the greatest surprise sat beside the mourning rancher—a fragile-appearing, white-faced, delicate-featured

girl with wide, frightened eyes that were shadowed with sadness. She looked as lost and helpless as if she had never so much as lifted a feather, in the line of work. This girl, Hondo realized—the rancher forgot to make any introductions —must be Susan Shackleton, the oldster's only daughter.

To some men's eyes, she might have seemed a beauty in her well-tailored clothing in the latest style. But Hondo viewed her with a feeling of pity. With the Murphys brewing up some kind of sudden treachery, all that the situation needed was a helpless female to clutter up his worries.

But Nebraska, as Hondo had come to call the young stranger, seemed to feel quite otherwise. He immediately seemed to accept full personal responsibility for the brown-eyed blond girl.

Old Sun River seemed hardly to notice that he had acquired a new hand. And his grief was something that was beyond the Texan's understanding. It irritated Hondo, this mourning of the oldster for a wife whose love had been too slight for her to share the dangers and hardships of the frontier ranch with him.

In Texas, women fought beside their men and took what might come with them. But not Shackleton's wife. A house in the safety and comparative comfort and convenience of Fort Benton had been maintained for her and her pampered daughter ever since Shackleton had started his ranch in the late Fifties to supply a beef contract for the Army crew building the now famous Mullan Wagon Road.

Yet, now, for all his lonely toil and separation, the oldster mourned her as if her death had robbed him of a real partner.

There was no use trying to get information out of Shackleton, who refused to take hold of his outfit. This threw Hondo and Nebraska on their own. But they didn't team together, as would have been expected.

The young stranger from Nebraska was occupied in another direction. His eyes were for Shackleton's daughter.

Amused, Hondo watched like an old dog the action of the pups, and he was aware that the girl was just as aware of Nebraska as the latter was of her.

This all had the makings of a bit of drama, for it was obvious that Shackleton did not know what was going on.

Several times within the next three days Hondo tried to engage Shackleton in talk about the ranch work or cattle, or something from which he could lead up to the subject of possible trouble with the Murphys. But each time he met with failure.

Then the matter was taken from his hands by the appearance, one morning, of Brig and black-bearded old Marryin' Monk Murphy, his father. They rode in as if to show neighborly interest and to extend sympathy. But the pose did not deceive Hondo.

Brig was decked out in new buckskins that still carried the pungent odor of smoke from the campfires over which they had been tanned. There was a cold light of mockery in his yellow eyes as he looked at the Texan with a wolfish grin.

For Hondo the only pleasant aspect of the situation was that the Murphys did not know about the rifle Nebraska would have lined up on them from the barn, for that young man had decided to stay under cover in the daylight hours and keep his presence unknown if possible.

On the other side of the picture was his certainty that somewhere, barely out of sight, were the twenty other members of the Murphy clan who were old enough to be gun-handy.

But if the old Jack Mormon clan leader was prompted by an evil intent, it was well concealed as he wrung Shackleton's unresisting hand and exuded sympathy. Hondo had left the colt he had been working in the corral and moved in close, on the alert for treachery.

BUT his suspicion seemed groundless. The glib-tongued elder Murphy actually seemed to draw Shackleton's thoughts from his grief, after the pre-

liminary sympathy and discussion of his bereavement, and to lift his spirits.

The elder Murphy had remounted as if about to leave when casually, as by way of a passing remark, he said to Shackleton:

"Well, it's time to brand calves again. I reckon you'll want the boys to ride over and get the chore done one of these days directly?"

Why, with the odds so lopsided in their favor, the Murphys did not want to bring their game square out in the open was more than Hondo could figure. But he didn't cotton to the idea of an open invitation bringing the whole outfit onto Shackleton range for him to watch.

"That won't be necessary this year," Hondo spoke up as Shackleton hesitated, his mind seeming to take unsteady steps as it turned once more toward the path of everyday existence and its work. "I can manage the brandin' this year all right."

From the displeasure that crossed the Murphys' faces he knew he had interfered with some devious plan. For just an instant he knew an inward satisfaction.

Then a new and unexpected voice put a change on things.

"This is Father's ranch, and it seems to me it is for him to say what is necessary and what is not."

No sound of the cabin door opening or closing, or of footsteps, had warned Hondo of Susan Shackleton's coming. And to the surprise of seeing her out in the sunlight, looking so out of place in her prim town clothes against the bleak background of the drab frontier ranchyard, was added the surprise of hearing one he had considered a mousy, disinterested little person speaking so forthrightly.

"Why—" Shackleton began haltingly. "Well, Brig and the boys have always tended to the brandin'."

"Sure," old Murphy glibly approved in hearty tones. "A man that can rope like your new Texas man might do the job in a month, alone, but with a dozen or so of my boys to bunch the cows and hold 'em for him he could do it in two-three days. It's just neighborly, and we'd like the chance to watch him work. You say when."

"The sooner the better," Susan spoke up again. "When we get a complete count on the cattle we want to sell the ranch as quickly as possible. Father's spent too much time out in this dreadful place already."

Hondo glanced at Brig Murphy and found that for the first time the fellow's attention was not upon him. And the cold mockery that had been in Brig's yellow eyes as he had stared at Hondo had given place to a bright glow of interest now as they looked upon Sue Shackleton.

Disgust welled up within the Texan. He turned on his heel and with spurs ringing sharply at each angry step headed for the barn.

"Reckon maybe we'd just as leave get started at it tomorrow then," he vaguely heard old Murphy say. "But we're sorry to hear you're thinkin' of quitting the business. Maybe we could make a dicker?"

By the time Hondo had pulled his saddle from the bronc he had been gentling and switched it to Blue Agate, the blue roan, the Murphys had pulled out. As he led the roan out of the corral through the gate at one corner of the barn he heard Nebraska moving around inside. He paused before mounting.

"If you're lookin' for trouble with the Murphys you're maybe with the wrong outfit, pardner," he growled. "Looks like there maybe won't be no shootin' after all. That buckskin Murphy was lookin' the gal over like a moonstruck tomcat. This is one mess of snake tracks that's gettin' too many for me to figure. I'm takin' a little pasear out in the open to see if it helps my savvy."

Martha was the source of the help he hoped to get by way of enlightenment as to what the scheming, lobo-eyed Murphy outfit was up to. But though he visited each of the places where he usually met the girl, he found no sign of her or of her recent presence. And so a measure of

anxiety was added to his perplexity.

He had expected sudden and treacherous violence from the Murphys, now that he knew their real objectives. Their pose of continued neighborliness, their apparent decision to play their cards close, had him worried.

His peace of mind was not bettered any when he rode back to the ranch after dark to find that Nebraska had pulled out with his entire possessions. Now it looked as if he was for it lone-handed for sure. Nothing would have pleased the cowboy better, that night, than a feeling of being free to pull out for Texas, but his code of sticking to his outfit bound him to see the business through.

With Nebraska gone and old Shackleton bogged down in grief, his townbred daughter adding further to his forlorn confusion with her insistence that he sell the ranch, it looked to Hondo as if he alone must settle whatever trouble came. And that it would come, sooner or later, he had no doubt.

A crew of Murphys big enough to handle ten times all the cattle there were in that part of Montana Territory showed up the next morning. Not by act or word did they show themselves hostile, but Hondo uneasily sensed a calculated patience in them. He had an idea that he would know before the day was out how a man felt in a lion's den.

Shackleton's Durhams were easy to gather and handle. Before noon of the second day the outfit had gathered and thrown together the bunch of five hundred-odd animals that made up his entire herd.

In order to keep the enemy manpower split up and separated as much as possible so that he had no more of them to watch at one time than necessary, Hondo had the herd split up, and worked a bunch at a time in small lots. This kept most of the Jack Mormon clan scattered out at a distance from the branding fire and the cattle being worked, busy holding the various other small bunches of nervous cows.

Brig and old Monk took over the branding, and Monk cut ear-marks whenever a calf showed up that hadn't felt Hondo's rope before. The Texan kept them busy.

One of the young breed members of the clan was tending the branding fire, a chore he had picked for himself, figuring it would be an easy spot. But the way Hondo fit hemp to the calves, the young breed was soon sweating more than any other man in the crew, trying to keep his fire up and a hot iron always ready.

But the old pack leader, Brig, and the bull-backed kid the calf wrestling had been wished off onto, were kept just about as busy. Hondo figured that was one way to keep their minds off of cussedness.

The afternoon was half gone when old Sun River Sam Shackleton showed up from the ranch. To Hondo, the oldster's mental vagueness was pretty plainly shown by the fact that he had come there and left the girl alone at the house. But he felt no cause for alarm because the Murphys had intermarried so extensively with the Indians of the region, had so many redskinned in-laws, that the reds had got out of the habit of bothering either of the two little cow spreads.

That was the only point in the Murphys' favor of which the Texan knew.

CHAPTER IV

Win, Lose, or Draw

AFTER watching the work for a while, Shackleton seemed to perk up, to begin taking more interest in things than he had since his wife's death. He was more like his old self when he climbed off his horse, proposing to take over Monk's job of earmarking. Like the Murphys, it was a new chore to him, and interested him.

His suggestion got no argument. All four Murphys on the ground were ready for a change. Old Monk filled their places.

"You, Stub," he called in his gruff voice of command, "come team with Shackleton

at Brig's job, handlin' the irons."

That brought out of saddle a quick-moving, rawhide-sinewed individual with a long, hard-lined face. His big, predatory head and bull neck were rooted in massive shoulders above a heavy, deep-chested torso that was so out of proportion to his undersized, short legs, that he had a grotesque look of being half-man and half-boy.

His taste in clothing differed from that of the others, too, running more to the impractical and ornate. But the gun-belt around his wasp waist had seen hard use as had the holster and gun hanging against his right hip.

If Hondo had not been certain before, he had no doubt left now. Here was the clan's professional killer, Stub Murphy, of whom Martha had warned him. The man whose trail young Nebraska was following.

Hondo knew he was up against a marked deck, but what he could do except hang and rattle he couldn't figure, except to curse Fate that Shackleton wouldn't recognize his danger. Shackleton was a big, powerfully built man, completely capable of taking care of himself when he was normal. But in his present state of mind he seemed unaware or unmindful of his normal instinct for preservation, and he could be taken completely unaware.

The day wore on, Hondo alert for treachery every moment, keeping his eyes on the oldster at the branding just as much as possible. A wind whipped up and black clouds that had piled up threateningly upon the horizon advanced before it until they engulfed the sky.

A fitful rain began peppering down, and in a little while the newly green sod underfoot had become as slick as glass, even under the sure-footed hoofs of Hondo's private top horse from which he had been roping. He stopped long enough to switch his saddle to Blue Agate. The colt was shod with sharp, calked plates.

Still there had not been one wrong move by any of the Murphys. Another hour and a half would finish the day. A feeling of hopefulness tried to take root, to drive out Hondo's skepticism.

The blue roan was good on a rope, for a colt, and a willing learner, but he just didn't have the savvy about handling himself in a herd that Hondo's cow-wise private horse had. Work in a herd was new to Blue Agate. And so the Texan was unable to keep his eye on all the doings at the branding fire as much as he would have liked to.

But more than half the time until dark was gone, the colt was settling down fine and catching on fast, and still Hondo's suspicions seemed unjustified. The rain had settled down for an all-night drizzle, and the Texan's catch-rope was beginning to take enough water to be hard to handle. For the first time that day he began missing catches.

AFTER dragging the next calf to the fire, he rode on to the light wagon in which grub for the outfit had been brought. He had cached an extra rope there to keep it dry, and decided to use it to finish out the day.

It was the work of but a minute to make the switch. He had thrown the dry rope over the saddle-horn and was reaching for the stirrup to mount again when a sudden cry of alarm from behind jerked him around.

"Why look, boys!" the short-legged Murphy handling the branding iron was yelping. "That cussed Texas man's done knifed poor old Shackleton!"

Hondo's startled eyes came to the contorted form of the oldster, prone upon the grass beside the tied-down calf he had been ear-marking. A widening stain of blood was creeping out across the green from beneath him.

With angry self-condemnation the Texan saw the whole scheme. There at the wagon he was closer to Shackleton by a pace or two than was the apparently outraged Murphy who was excitedly flourishing the branding iron, with which, it appeared, he had just returned to the fire.

It would be only Hondo Uvalde's word

against the lot of them. But why should they have gone to all the bother of a frameup?

AS IF by a prearranged signal all the others of the Murphy clan had quit the cattle and were closing in upon the branding fire, old Monk and Brig in the lead. The old hellion's wild black beard was whipping back across his shoulder as he came at a high run.

"Why you murderin' skunk!" old Murphy bawled, almost frothing at the mouth as he reined up hard and piled from the saddle.

Rushing to Shackleton's still form, he turned it so that the knife buried in the left side was visible, with one of Shackleton's gnarled hands clutching it.

"I reckon you're goin' to say you never done it—or that he done it himself, accidental!" the Murphy clan leader charged derisively, his hard yellow eyes flashing up to Hondo again. "Slipped on this wet grass and fell! You wouldn't believe such a thin story if it was us tellin' it, would you?"

A silent fury burned in Hondo, but he was a smart poker player and knew when he was overmatched. He said nothing; just kept his eyes watchful of as many of the gathering clansmen as possible, while centering them upon the old hellion they looked to for directions.

A slow, backward step put his back against the partial protection of the wagon box. That was the best he could do for himself at the moment.

When the silence had run on for a couple of moments with Hondo making no sound or move, Brig broke it.

"The Texas feller don't seem to be so tough today." A bleak grin bared his wolfish teeth. "I'd like to make him repent his wrongful ways. But I reckon you'd best take him down to Benton and let 'em hang him legal. Me, I've got more important chores." His grin turned to a twisted smirk. "I'd best be ridin' to console the poor little brown-eyed gal he's made an orphan. Bein' all alone on a black, stormy night like this would go mighty hard with her."

Brig mounted and rode away when old Monk took up the play again.

"You'd better shed your guns peaceable now, mister. Then some of the boys'll take you to Benton."

"If you want my guns you'll have to come take them," Hondo muttered challengingly.

"I reckon that wouldn't be much trouble—off your dead carcass, if we didn't want you alive to see you hang. But we don't want no more Texans hittin' these parts bringin' a grudge against us, so you'll get yours strictly legal." Monk's grizzled, bearded head swung slightly, as he spoke over his shoulder: "Come get his guns, Stub! But mind you don't kill him, now."

The short-legged Murphy moved forward with light but measured steps, a confident smirk twisting the hard lips of his long, horse face. His fingers were poised above the worn gun-butt in his holster. The others sat their saddles loosely, watching, plainly expecting that there could be but one outcome to this match, so were unmindful of their own guns. And to Hondo that brought a ray of hope.

The Texan's whole attention went to the little gunman advancing upon him. Imperceptibly Hondo settled into a slight crouch, ready. And then his lips parted in a taunting grin, right into the teeth of the advancing killer.

But the short-legged fellow was too old a hand at this grim game to let that bother him. He came on, though perhaps a little more slowly.

Then but a few paces separated them; pointblank range at which no man could miss. Hondo still breathed easily, but the Murphy gunhand's breath came and went noisily. And the tension had straightened the others in their saddles. In another moment guns would speak or one man's nerve would crack.

But the moment did not come. Coming like a lightning strike, a rifle shot screamed out of nowhere into the bunched horsemen, its menace magnified by the deep silence it shattered. Horses bogged

their heads in frightened pitching. What had been a tensely waiting group broke up in wild confusion.

Hondo waited no longer.

The little horse-faced killer made a frantic grab, trying to match the Texan's draw. But his gun had just cleared the holster when Hondo brought his long gun-barrel slamming down across the fellow's temple.

ONE quick jump put the Texan on top of old Murphy, and the oldster was pinioned in the encircling grip of one hard-muscled arm before he knew what had happened. The feel of Hondo's gun muzzle against his skull put a quick end to his struggles.

Somewhere one of the mounted Murphys got his horse quieted enough to pull a gun and snarling lead began whistling harmlessly wide of the mark.

"Stop it, you ox-brained fools!" the old clan leader bellowed. "You want me killed? Stop it!"

"What'll we do, Pa?" one of the younger ones of the pack yelled tremulously. "Where'd that rifle shot come from?"

"Shut up! Shut up!"

"The old man's lost his nerve," one of the older ones growled.

They were getting their mounts quieted now and starting slowly to spread out. Hondo eared back his gun-hammer. The ominous sound brought a quaking tremor against his arm from the old pack leader's rigid body.

"What you want I should do?" Murphy croaked.

"Tell 'em to stop that spreadin' out. Tell 'em to drag it out of here for home!"

"Coyote on me, huh? Leave me in this tight alone?"

"You won't live to get clear of it if they don't," Hondo promised. "Tell 'em, quick!"

Profanely the oldster relayed the orders. But others of the older men in the pack, old Monk's brothers or half-brothers or other family heads of shirt-tail kin, had stood their ground. In their sullen

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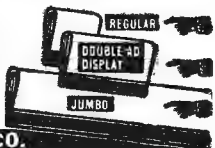

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eyes was a plain challenge that they did not propose to be backed down by one lone Texan. Sharp nods of their heads sent the younger ones on, moving warily to the sides and then to encirclement.

Hondo had made his play. It looked as if he had lost the jackpot. And then the unidentified rifleman dropped another hot-lead chip among the slowly spreading clansmen on the left wing. The uproar that caused had not quieted when a shot from the right stopped the spread toward encirclement on that side.

But early dusk was beginning to gather, and this deadly play had to be finished quickly.

"It looks like my Texas pards showed up just in time," Hondo drawled, with a forced show of relief and confidence. "We fought our way up the Bozeman Road right smack dab through the heart of the Sioux Nation with Nels Story's longhorn herd last summer. I reckon we can take our part with a sorry Jack Mormon crew. You tough hands just say the word and I'll pull this trigger and we can play the string out right here."

He watched the uncertainty and indecision troubling the eyes of the Murphys while his words soaked in.

"If that meat's too tough for you to stomach," he went on, "then drag your freight out of here and don't stop ridin' till you're on your own range. And stay there! I'm takin' the old man and that sawed-off son in for Shackleton's killin'. If trouble's your dish, the S Slash S'll be fixed to bring it to you—now! So clear out—or get your powder smokin'!"

CHAPTER V

Hostage

IT WAS a bluff. But the uncertainty, the unknown quantity of odds were with Hondo. Even in the right a man likes to know what he's up against before starting trouble. The Murphy clan pulled out and left old Monk cursing furiously.

Hondo disarmed the Murphy pair and got them tied up before the short-legged Stub had time to come to. He had just finished the chore when an irritated growl from behind spun him around. He stared in unbelief at Shackleton, making a most uncorpselike effort to sit up. Fire was in his eyes.

"Take your own sweet time, damn it!" he growled. "But if you happen to get out of somethin' to do, come get this knife out of me. It's stuck in a rib and I can't budge it. Then get me tied up. I'm bleedin' like a hog, but otherwise I ain't damaged."

The listlessness that had claimed the old cowman had vanished. For the first time in weeks he sounded like himself, the tough old frontiersman who had gone out into a big country alone, bucked hostile Indians and scratched together a ranch with nothing but a gambler's love of long odds and the nerve to back them. Even his hair seemed transformed and more alive, bristling like the shaggy gray mane of an old he-lion.

"I was possumin'," the old cowman said when he quit cursing, after Hondo had pulled out the knife. "You thought I never heard the things you been tryin' to get me to listen to lately about them Murphys. I heard, but after all I've done for that outfit of trash just because I wanted some other whites in the country, even if they was such a sorry lot, I didn't want to listen.

"I knowed about them calves they been runnin', back in the brakes. But I winked at it, said nothin'; figured an outfit that had to scratch and grub and work their women like cattle, the way they seem to, to make a livin', maybe needed some good critters to build up with. And the Indians has got less troublesome since the Murphys moved in and started marryin' the reds wholesale. So I said to heck with the loss. I just—"

Shackleton broke off with a gasp, gritting his teeth as Hondo pressed a bandage hard against the wound and bound it down tight to stop the bleeding.

"That'll learn you to think a Texan's

lyin'." The puncher grinned mirthlessly. "But now that you ain't killed, what do we do with the Murphy trash?"

"Give 'em credit for tryin', and don't make 'em wait for justice!" the old cowman roared. "There's a team of their'n with the horses, ain't there? Put their horses to the wagon and tie a rope around their necks to the rear ingate and leave their hands tied back. If they can't trust their own horses to take 'em home without runnin' away, then leave 'em worry it out."

An inky night closed in on Hondo and the old cowman long before they covered the half-dozen miles in to the ranch. Old Sun River Sam had produced a bottle from a saddle-pocket and begun working on it to kill the pain of the knife wound in his ribs. Between pulls on the bottle he grumbled to himself and the world in general.

"Tried to make me spill my insides with my own knife, that sawed-off, sneakin' Murphy did. And me thinkin' nothin' would suit me better'n to die, after livin' like an Injun the last fifteen years, doin' my own cooking, going nigh loco from the consarned disgustingness of nothin' but my own company. And all because I'm tryin' to build enough of a stake so's I can live in town with my woman like a white man. And then she— By grab, I would of died, too, in my own good time, if that slimy Murphy hadn't tried to kill me! The cussed fool! Now I'm mad! I'll hire every Texas pard you got and run them Jack Mormons from here, and cut that ear-mark on every one of 'em where I catch him! And I'm so damned contrary I wouldn't die now if the devil himself come up with a special invite!"

Old Sun River was still going on with his tirade as they neared the ranch. He reined up suddenly. This time he voiced a new thought.

"Say! Where is them Texas trail-mates of yours, anyhow? Why ain't they showed up yet? Are they backward?"

"They're long gone for Texas for all I know," Hondo drawled.

[*Turn page*]

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SHACKLETON was only an indistinct blur in the blackness, but Hondo could feel the old man's sudden gaze upon him.

"That was a bluff," Hondo said, "but I'm goin' to load you and the girl into the buckboard and be long gone from here before that gang of Murphys ever tumble."

"But them shots?"

"Our young friend Nebraska is all I can figure."

Hondo didn't want to think about the shot from the opposite direction. For if it had come from Martha, and she were ever even suspected, her suffering would be unthinkable.

The ranchyard was just ahead. A light shone from the cabin window. Hondo reined up and quit his saddle. He handed his reins to Shackleton.

"Brig said he was heading this way," he observed. "I'll Injun around and see if he made it."

It was slow going to keep his feet from making sloshing noises on the wet ground, but he finally neared the window. And then, only a step away, too late he felt a slight tug as he brought his foot forward. Immediately there was a tinny clatter, as if a dishpan full of tinware were being dropped. Indian-canny Brig Murphy had set a warning trap. He was here all right.

But almost before the clatter started, anticipating it and knowing what it meant, Hondo lunged forward, hit the cabin door, and plunged inside in a diving roll. He got a flashing glimpse of Brig Murphy, satisfaction in his yellow eyes, the gun in his hand swinging quickly for a snap shot at the Texan's moving form. And behind the buckskin-clad clansman, lunging forward with the chair to which he was tied, in an effort to hit the back of the fellow's legs, was young Nebraska.

Hondo hit the floor, bouncing down and up, off at a tangent, a bullet burning along his right ribs instead of through his backbone. His gun was out and coming up, and Brig Murphy made a good target, lurching forward, momentarily off-balance. For Nebraska's frantic move had connected.

Then Susan Shackleton came into Hondo's line of vision as he lined up on Brig Murphy's moving form. She stood frozen, one hand raised before her mouth to suppress a scream, her back against the cabin wall.

Hondo snapped a shot before Murphy could close upon the girl. But missed in his haste. Then the only target he had that was not shielded by the girl's body was Brig's gunhand and forearm.

His next shot he put where it counted. Murphy's gun clattered to the floor and his other arm dropped from the girl to clutch its bullet-torn mate. A snarl like that from a wounded animal tore through his lips. He might have grabbed Sue again before Hondo reached him, except that for the first time since the Texan had seen the girl, she did something useful.

Murphy's rough touch, or something, had broken the spell of her terror. While he was still off-balance from bullet shock she quickly put a foot behind his heels and put all she had into a decidely unladylike shove.

Brig Murphy lurched back, almost falling. And then Hondo slammed into him!

Hondo knew it was to be a life-and-death struggle, with no mercy shown, and none was to be given.

They went down to the floor wrapped in a tangle of arms and legs. Murphy was shrilling epithets, Hondo was growling like an old fighting dog. They locked together, rolled over and over, wrenching at each other for an opening.

Then, quite suddenly, the smashing began. Their fists hammered, their knees jolted at stomachs, and soon they were clawing and kicking. They broke apart for wind, sprang to their feet, then closed again.

Like two savage beasts Hondo and Brig Murphy hit the rough floor, snarling and slashing at each other. But the fight had gone contrary to crafty Brig Murphy's liking. He snaked his lithe big body clear of Hondo's grasp in a snap roll that brought him to his feet.

THEN, instead of pressing his advantage, he plunged through the door into the night, almost colliding head-on with old Sun River Sam who came rushing in. The next moment, before Hondo could further hurry Murphy with hot lead, running hoofbeats set up a sudden, sloshing tattoo that quickly faded.

"That was a lovin' plan gone wrong," young Nebraska said and grinned wryly. He was rubbing his wrists where the ropes Sue Shackleton had just freed him, had chafed, when Hondo stepped back into the cabin. "That bad mister was really makin' plans for you, Hondo. I was feelin' awful bad about it."

"Wasn't that you—"

"That took your part in the fracas at the roundup camp?" Nebraska nodded. "And them shots are what fetched that Injun-footed lady-killer back, I reckon. But you had the deal goin' all your way before he got me where he wanted me. So he tied me in the saddle and came this way fast. He had some ideas about talkin' the little lady into somethin'. But this just wasn't his night, I guess."

"I don't know," Hondo declared soberly. "When he gets with the others they'll soon figure out the bluff I run. I had 'em thinkin' you was saddlemates of mine from Texas that I sent for. Until then they was goin' to make a fight, even though I had old Murphy dead to rights. They'll come swarmin' by daylight. You'd better take Sue and her pa in the buckboard and pull out for the stage road. And pronto."

"Hold on there, Texas feller," Shackleton protested. "Don't count me out of any plans you're makin'. I was fightin' for what's mine before you was born, and I can make a hand yet."

"All right—waste time jawing!" Hondo's voice sharpened with irritation. "The girl has to be got out of here and someone's got to take her."

"How come?" Shackleton demanded. "That girl can take her own part — if she ever gets any chance to learn how. Her grandma, Liz Shackleton, stood off

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guard's person. Hondo was mulling over that problem when, at the lower end of the camp, a brass-throated hound roared sudden alarm that became a snowballing tumult as every other dog in the clansmen's pack was quick to take it up.

Somewhere, by way of alarm or greeting, a gun barked. And Hondo was quick to give the resounding report company, blowing the lock to pieces. The next moment Martha was in his arms.

"I got caught!" she sobbed with relief. "A half-breed brat trailed me this afternoon and tattled about me shooting. I knew you'd come, but I was so afraid maybe you couldn't get here before—"

She broke off. Both tensed, listening, alarmed by the sudden quiet they could not explain. Then from a distance sounded a harsh, commanding voice both recognized. Old Monk was home.

"Quiet them damn dogs!" he roared. "Somebody get a light made. Quick about it if you want to go on livin'. We got news. Get a light. Gather round!"

"They'd have been gone long ago, riding to wipe out the Shackleton ranch, if Monk had been here," Martha murmured. "But instead they've been rowing among themselves about who's to give the orders."

"This may be the business," Hondo whispered, keeping his ears cocked. "There's horses up on the ridge, sis. Get up there and stay in the clear, whatever happens." He started her on her way before she could voice any protest. "This is man's work from here on," he said firmly.

WHEELING back, he went quickly toward the center of the sprawling camp. Someone already had fired a pile of dry brush, evidently kept ready for just such a purpose. Just pulling to a stop was the light wagon with old Monk and Stub aboard now, instead of atow at the rear. With them was a solemn-faced buck, his pony tied to a hame beside the team.

"Listen now, all of you old enough to tote a gun!" old Monk was bawling. "Chief Wild Boy here just come from the Eagle Rock Station down on the road. Me and Stub met up with him on the trail in.

up on the ridge overlooking the haphazard Murphy settlement. Had it not been for scattered lights, indicating general wakefulness, the settlement would have been hidden by the night.

"Just one thing," Hondo murmured. "Let me have time enough to find a certain girl and get her in the clear."

"We'll scout the layout first anyhow," one of the hard-voiced Angels murmured. "If they're scattered, we'll start the harvest of vengeance one by one. If they're bunched, we'll pick our ground and wait for dawn. Either way you'll have the time you need."

It was a hard proposition for an intruder to slip into the Murphy camp at any time. Just evading the many prowling hounds took a lot of doing. Tonight, with uneasy fears riding the clansmen, it took Apache prowess.

A tension-filled hour, or more, had gone before Hondo raised an answer to the night bird's call that had been his signal with Martha. The answer came from a squat, windowless cabin where a guard paced before the door.

Success of the whole dangerous chore here, and the lives of the eleven others with him, depended on Hondo's taking care of the guard with absolutely no noise to sound alarm. But the fellow knew his business, staying far enough from the cabin and anything offering shelter so that he would be hard to get at.

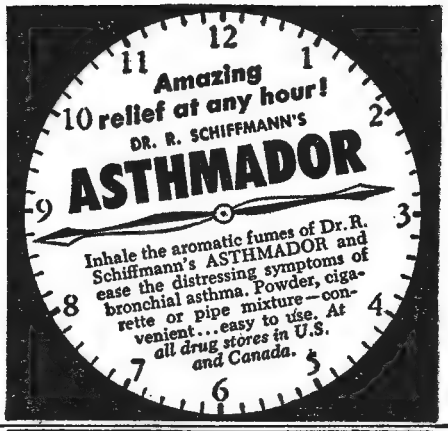
Finally Hondo circled and boldly approached from the front. As he neared the pacing guard he spoke familiarly.

"Got a match, brother?" he asked.

A short grunt, whether affirmative or negative he did not know, was his only answer. But a moment later a match flared in cupped hands, sketchily lighting a dark, half-breed face. The lids over yellow eyes fluttered once in surprise, then the whites rolled back as Hondo's slashing gun-barrel found its mark.

The next thing was the lock on the heavy door. A first quick search, followed by several carefully thorough ones, failed to reveal the key upon the unconscious

[*Turn page*]



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Answers to HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR WEST?

(See page 107)

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2. Infantry bugle calls were blown in the key of G. Cavalry in the key of C.
3. The Kansas legislature, in order to tame its wildness, abolished Abilene as a cattle shipping center.
4. The Alamo was originally a Franciscan mission, built about 1722.
5. The reaper. Without it, there would have been no gigantic wheat farms.

a blood-thirstin' pack of Mohawks a whole day once, with nothin' but hot water and soap lye."

Hondo glanced at young Nebraska.

"Three against thirty-odd, maybe better, with no Injun in-laws thrown in," he said. "We got all the best chances of a snowball in Hades. What you say?"

"I say the odds may be better'n you think," the young Nebraska rider declared. "Just as soon as I was sure who these Jack Mormon Murphys was, I sent for some help. I've got ten men camped not far from here. Danites, from Utah. Avengin' Angels, they call 'em. They're pretty good at such chores."

And then it was that young Nebraska told an amazing story of how he came to be here—and who he was.

An Oregon-bound train on the great Overland Trail, he said, had been pillaged one black night eighteen years before, and most of the immigrants massacred. A few young women and little girls had been carried off with the plunder, and sign left to lay the blame to the Mormons.

Next day an old Mormon elder had picked up a forlorn little boy from the nearby brush — the sole survivor. And the little boy had been raised for one purpose — to avenge his murdered family and Mormon honor for his old benefactor. The boy was young Nebraska. His real name had been lost with his family. He had grown up a son of Elder Tugwell, and was still on the trail of the killers.

CHAPTER VI

Mud, Blood, and Cinders

WHEN Nebraska had finished his story, he and Hondo rode into the night upon their grim mission, leaving old Sun River Sam Shackleton behind, only barely pacified by the idea that Hondo's Texans might show up and need directing.

Three hours later twelve riders reined

He says thirty-forty Texans was by there late this evenin' askin' the way to Shackleton's and roarin' to take up trouble this Texas man expected with us. And that many of 'em has got us outmatched. So all of you get a horse between your legs and scatter. They won't bother the womenfolks and kids none, so hunt the brush. Maybe we can get together enough Injuns, later on, that'd like to take some coup, but for now, we light out!"

Hondo waited no longer. Longer might be too late. He jerked his gun and closed in with a wild, Texas yell!

But he was not alone. Suddenly men were closing in on all sides. Young Nebraska was in the lead.

"This is one time you don't scatter on the wind, Murphys!" Nebraska was bawling. "Here's your payoff for a night eighteen years ago on the Overland. Feed 'em lead, boys!"

The suddenness and surprise of it seemed to paralyze the bunched clansmen for a moment. Old Monk was the first to claw for a gun. And his body shuddered from half a dozen heavy slugs before he could squeeze a trigger.

The team stampeded in blind terror. Stub Murphy left it in a flying leap that brought him to the ground scant yards from Hondo. Once again they faced each other, gun in hand this time.

Neither of them missed. A leg folded under Hondo, bringing him down to his knee, leaving Stub Murphy still standing. But Hondo's wound would heal. His last bullet smashed the misshapen killer's brain.

Big Brig Murphy appeared out of the swirling, gun-roaring press as Stub's body hit the ground. A sling held his right arm, but a wicked-bladed knife gleamed in his left.

Hondo's gun was empty. He hurled it at the swiftly closing knife wielder, and lurched forward frantically toward Stub's fallen gun. But Brig moved too fast. In desperation the Texan straightened as best he could, to grip Brig's knife hand and close with him if possible.

Vaguely, as if from another world, he

[*Turn page*]

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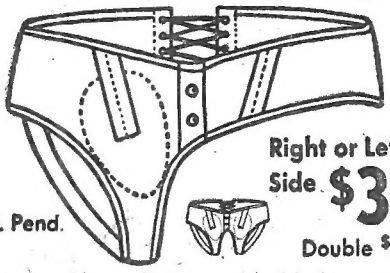

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heard a scream. And Brig collapsed, just short of him. The long-bladed knife plunged hilt-deep into the wet earth, instead of in its intended mark. Hondo got a glimpse of Martha in the far shadows, her carbine smoking.

Hondo Uvalde made a vain effort to load his gun, but the earth had suddenly taken to erratic spinning. But elsewhere professionals of vengeance were keeping up their deadly cross-fire. Within the first moments all the oldsters of the evil pack had been cut down. The younger ones, leaderless, broke and ran. And the Avengers let them go. The old blood debt was settled.

The blackness of the eastern sky was lightening reluctantly, when old Sun River Sam Shackleton got there with the Texan. He cursed Fate for his tardiness, then blessed her for the grisly job that had been finished.

"This here Texas feller complains it don't get warm enough in this fine country for him," he wound up, poking at Hondo. "Ain't it been warm enough around these parts this mornin'?"

"I hear it's a hard country to beat, come summer time." Hondo grinned. "And I'd advise Texas hands to stick around for a time because there might—just might—"

He glanced over to where Sue Shackleton, who had shown up from somewhere in boy's riding clothes, was fussing over young Nebraska's wounds, the pair each completely unaware of the rest of the world's existence. Then he looked up into the blue eyes of Martha.

"Might be a couple of weddin' whingdings," someone finished for him. "Is that what you're tryin' to say?"

"I'll let you know when we get time to ask the ladies."

"Ho!" a grinning puncher snorted. "Gosh sakes, boys, he don't know. So be danged sure, that you don't tell him."

"Tell me what?" Hondo demanded, not savvying the hooraw.

The joshing puncher got the nod from the others, then turned to Hondo.

"Why you poor country boy, don't you know these here things always come out just like the ladies plan 'em?"

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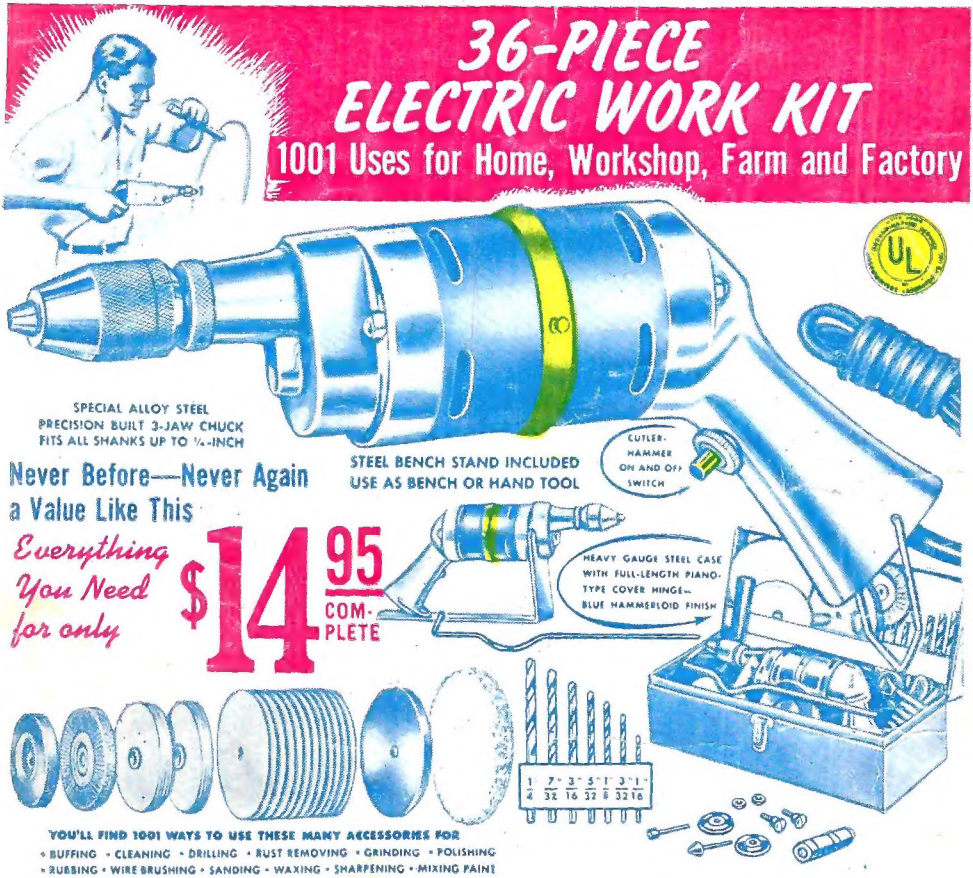

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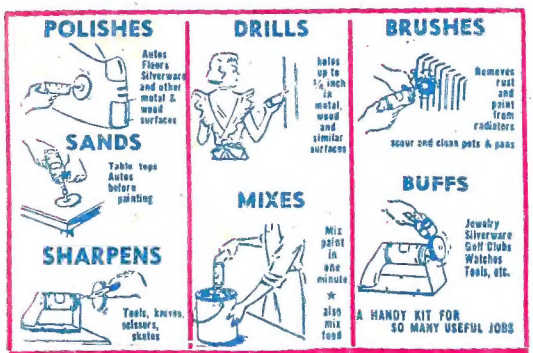

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